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BY

M. BETHAM-EDWARDS.

IN ONE VOLUME.

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A

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AUTHOR OF

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1892.

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A DREAM OF MILLIONS.

A DREAM OF MILLIONS.

It was twelve of the clock—midnight—and the Reverend John Humphrey Dollar wound up his watch with the odd reflection that when he next looked at the familiar dial for that purpose he should be a millionaire. Certainly that, and perhaps much more. The fortune his dying kinsman had just made over to him by word of mouth, was known to be vaster than its accumulator would ever acknowledge. By what means, and for what purpose, he had amassed such wealth, none of his neighbours knew. There was the fact, and it concerned nobody now but his next of kin, the Reverend John Humphrey Dollar, who had been summoned from his post as schoolmaster a hundred miles off, to receive the miser's millions by verbal testament before properly qualified witnesses. Illness had stricken down the hale sexagenarian in the midst of his money-getting, and, strange to say, he had as yet made no will. But there lived one of his blood and name—a clergyman, a sufficient guarantee that the Church and charities would have their due; a man of learning and parts, moreover,

of austereness in daily life, sound political principles, and accustomed to work for daily bread. A gleam of comfort was evidently imparted to the dying man by the thought that he had such an heir. He was past expressing these thoughts now. All that he had to do was to meet his end as became a good Churchman and a bequeather of millions. Doubtless it had comforted him to think that the world would talk of his wealth when he was gone, and that, whatever became of it, the Church and the poor would not be forgotten.

And all that the Reverend John Humphrey Dollar had to do was to prepare his mind for the extraordinary change of fortune in store for him. Sorrow for his kinsman's death he could not possibly feel, nor need affect. The pair had hardly shaken hands half-a-dozen times in life, and were, indeed, all but strangers to each other. The utmost decorum exacted was as much show of dismay as if he should see some stranger drop down dead in the public ways.

So he sat alone awaiting his millions. A bright fire burned on the hearth, for it was winter, and under ordinary circumstances he would have drowsed in his soft easy chair after the long railway journey, made third class. Wine stood on the table, but he left it untouched. Time enough and to spare for epicureanism! He must think. It was only natural under the circumstances that his thoughts should be of the earth, earthy. He was a good man, according to his lights, upright, rigid in the performance of his duty, an alms-giver, and had

been in times past an excellent son and brother. On the small stipend he received as head master of a poorly-endowed grammar-school, he had for many years supported an aged mother and a paralyzed sister, possessing also an invariable sixpence to bestow upon a pitiful case. But the whole concern was a shabby one. The enforced shabbiness of his life had ever been a thorn in the flesh. It perpetually galled him to feel himself ill-dressed, meanly-housed, straitened in circumstances, and for these paltry reasons degraded to a lower social sphere than that to which he was born.

A gentleman, the son of a gentleman, possessed certainly of more culture than most of his neighbours, yet, because he was poor and shabby, the world, that is to say, the world he cared about, ignored him. Slighted he had hardly been, simply taken no more notice of than if he did not exist. For fifteen years he had been living in a populous town, a large proportion of the inhabitants belonging to his own status, but he was as completely a stranger to the population of that pleasant watering-place as when he first began his honest career there.

He need not, of course, have led an isolated life for all that. He might have found friends and acquaintances in other circles; it never entered his head to descend a rung of the social ladder. He gave his hand courteously alike to his apothecary and his washerwoman. He would no more have dreamed of visiting on equal terms at the house of one than of the other.

After all, perhaps, he hardly blamed others for such forlornness. The world's standards were very much after the pattern of his own. He felt bitterly now that unless it were so, he should regard this sudden accession to wealth with other eyes.

Were he magnanimous, lofty-souled, heroic, he should be building up a very different future now. He had all along resented his pitiful furtunes from a worldling's standpoint: what wonder that his first exaltation should have something mundane about it too? He meant to do good, great good, with his money, but a man's impulse in such a crisis must be to think of himself. The first thought to strike him was that he should be on much better terms with that poor self of his now. Hitherto he had not enjoyed self-content. His unprosperous appearance and humiliating circumstances had soured him. He felt in a measure responsible for such a state of things. He ought to have resisted, shown more self-assertion, more confidence, and contrived somehow to obtain a better position for himself. Such retrospection had been daily his fare. What he had to do now was to look forward. It made him smile complacently to figure himself to the end of his days a well-dressed man. In the eyes of ninety-nine out of every hundred the outer man is of more importance than the inner. The Rev. John Humphrey Dollar's history had been one that those who saw could read. A man's fortunes are proclaimed by the clothes he wears.

Yes; trifle as it seemed, this assurance of henceforth being a well-dressed man could but impart unqualified satisfaction. To be well-dressed implies so many creditable things—taste, good company, easy circumstances—and is, moreover, of the first importance to a man's appearance, and by natural sequence his relations to the other sex. The tailor has more to do with success in matters of the heart than is generally taken into account, and the Rev. Mr. Dollar knew well enough that if he had hitherto passed for an ill-favoured, ungainly man, nature was less to blame than a scanty purse. There is no premium put upon shabbiness.

His thoughts, having followed this track, naturally followed another akin to it. He thought of marriage, and decided that he should now marry. Up to the present time, he had remained a bachelor simply because he could not afford to marry the woman to his taste. He might doubtless have married many a good girl who would have shared his threadbare fortunes, even aided him in a humble way, taken little boys into the house to teach, and uncomplainingly gone through the drudgery of a pinched existence from year to year. The thought of such a possibility was insupportable to him. Better a lonely, childless life, than little beings unprovided with the luxury of a nursery, ill-shod, dirty-pinafored, and set down to bread and treacle, in consequence of the high price of butter. There was more than one special woman he would fain

have had for his wife, but hitherto these had been quite out of his reach. In fact, they were only just aware of his existence. He had never been invited to a dinner-party or ball in the gay place in which he lived. Still, from time to time, old college friends, in a far better position than himself, had spent a short time there, and at their houses he had been brought into contact with what we are pleased to call society.

He had on these occasions been introduced to at least two or three girls with whom he felt sure he could have been happy. For, let sentimentalists talk as they will, here and there men and women fall in love as the phrase goes, but by far the greater number of marriages are dictated by a sense of the fitness of things, general liking, a dozen motives besides love.

The first of these, Edith Clifford, was a baronet's daughter and a beauty. She was the eldest of five sisters, as yet in the school-room, but who promised to be as handsome as herself. They would not have a penny. Sir Archibald, their father, was the poorest baronet in the county. But a girl of spirit and fine eyes like Edith was not likely to want for suitors. If report spoke truly, she had refused more than one already. She wanted to see life, she said. She would marry no man who could not first take her to the moon before settling down to be Darby and Joan. This, and other spirited sayings of the young lady, had reached his ears, and they pleased him. He felt sure here of

a generous nature and warm heart. Such a girl would refresh every-day existence, and put life and naïveté into the most commonplace surroundings. A man could never grow worldly with such a wife. She would care, if not for the best things in life, at least for those which were genuine and good. And she was not in the least sentimental. She was far too natural, moreover, to be a flirt. He felt sure she would marry him if he promised to take her to the moon—in other words, as far as inhabitants of this globe can get. And generous girls are ready to do anything for their families. A rich son-in-law was exactly what Sir Archibald wanted.

Then there was another sweet woman of a very different type, he thought, even more suited to him than Edith Clifford. This was the Lady Felicia Strange—gentle stately daughter of an earl—she also undowered, keeping up traditional appearances by help of a dowager aunt. Lady Felicia was thirty, an orphan, related to the oldest nobility of England. Without being in the least a snob, the Rev. Mr. Dollar liked lineage. Good descent meant to him some of the highest titles to respect a human being can have—good manners, a high standard of truth and honour. To become the husband of such a woman would be to attain an unassailable social position, to free that of a new-made millionaire for once and for all from the gloss of vulgarity. Such a wife, moreover, would be sure not to abuse his circumstances. Her bringing up alone, as

one of several daughters of a noble, but impoverished house, was a sufficient guarantee against display and bad taste. The refinement that comes of birth and breeding, revolts against such show as pleases those unaccustomed to elegance. And, as a woman, Lady Felicia very nearly reached his ideal. Her manners were very sympathetic. He was quite sure that, like himself, she had been flouted by the world; but instead of hardening under this process, and taking refuge, as he had done, in self-contained cynicism, she had softened. There was no hauteur about her, no coldness; rather the sweet, insinuating graciousness of a woman, on the look-out for kindness and sympathy. Her voice had a great charm in his ears, and then the English she spoke! How refreshing this pure, slightly old-fashioned English speech, after the strange, slangy, unfeminine utterances, in which even well-bred girls indulge! Her dress was what might be called old-fashioned, too, and matched her speech—quiet, subdued, simple. She was the woman he would be proud to have on his arm. And, from the little society talk they had had, he gathered that she possessed culture of a kind rare even in these days of learned women. She read and thought. The book she loved would be his books. The house to his taste would be the house to her taste. Two thoughts made him smile. The incongruity of his name had always been an annoyance to him. To be called Dollar, and never have a spare coin in his pocket, seemed a cruel irony of fortune, but

the name of Lady Felicia would remove all vulgarity. Lady Felicia Dollar sounded extremely well, he thought.

The next smile was pure epicurean. The Rev. Mr. Dollar had no bloodthirsty tastes—in other words, he was not a sportsman, nor was he a mountaineer. But he was a lover of horses. His idea of physical enjoyment was a quiet ride through green country lanes with an agreeable woman, who should be as well mounted as himself. Lady Felicia was an admirable horsewoman. This should be their one luxury and pastime, for the Rev. Mr. Dollar had spiritual as well as sensual ideas. He did not intend to squander his wealth in self-indulgence. His millions should at least benefit others as much as himself. There were public causes he would further, social questions affecting the good of the commonalty he would now uphold, movements, spiritual, moral, and intellectual, in which he would take active part. He should come into the arena of active life without the oft-times hampering sense of routine. Just as the skilled amateur will often show broader views, a juster insight, and deeper, more natural feeling than the professional artist or critic, so may an ingenuous, untrained philanthropist or sociologist be able to take wholly new views of human ills and their palliatives. Yes, to discuss the various schemes for improving the world with Lady Felicia, as they rode through country lanes, would be enjoying life and opportunities indeed!

From thinking of generalities he came to particulars.

If it would be uplifting to benefit suffering humanity, how much more delightful to benefit his friends! And who hath friends of the rich and happy only? The new-made millionaire felt a pang as he reflected that the two beings who had shared the poverty of so many years could not share his wealth. He had no near kinsfolk to be gladdened by the crumbs that fall from the rich man's table. But if he had no blood relations, he had those bound to him by closer ties. There was an old college tutor of his, on whom had fallen evil days. On the occasion of his last visit to him—how well John Dollar remembered it!—in his dingy chambers the old man had apologized ruefully for the poor fare.

"The doctor's orders were chicken and Madeira, forsooth!" he said; "as well order Cleopatra's pearl steeped in vinegar."

Dollar went home determined to despatch the regales, but, alas! to this day money had been wanting. Henceforth his friend should have chicken and Madeira in plenty. Dollar's eyes moistened at the joy of informing his old tutor that he should enjoy two hundred a year. This was one pinched life to be eased along the down-hill path. Like all poor men, Mr. Dollar had many protégés and hangers-on. He felt in duty bound to share his prosperity with his old tutor, but early association and kindly feeling now took the shape of many a claim. There was his college friend, James Downing, who had taken to literary pursuits instead of the out-of-door life that might have given him a physique.

This poor fellow was hopelessly struggling against a consumptive temperament and ill-health generally, the cares of domestic life and a smoky London climate to boot, when a couple of winters at Algiers might quite set him up. Then, not to speak of pensioners, how many small yet priceless services might a rich man render his friends—help this one's promising lad to a profession, that one's girl to a marriage outfit or a college curriculum! A millionaire may, indeed, supply eyes, ears, hands, digestion, and even appetite to his friends, seeing that most of us at some time or other find out that these tried servants of ours, the senses, are at least for a time worn out. Especially in Dollar's line of life that was the case, most of his friends being of those who wear out their brains and bodies by perpetual strain.

At last he began to think of himself, and what a wide field here for satisfaction and benevolence! The Rev. Mr. Dollar was not a vain or self-inflated man, and did not over-estimate himself; perhaps, indeed, erred on the other side. The superciliousness of the world had led him to discommend his own Ego. He had summed up things in general with the reflection that, after all, human beings were poor creatures, and the Rev. John Humphrey Dollar had got, perhaps, his deserts.

But all the time there had been a lurking conviction that the world was judging, or rather misjudging, him by circumstances rather than character. And are any

of us without weakness? It was pleasant to think that henceforth he should be listened to, made way for, no longer meet with the half attention accorded to shabbiness, no longer be jostled against by careless neighbours. Respect hath more than charm. It brings consciousness with it, as Mr. Dollar knew to his cost. How many times, but for his calling, he should have cursed the time-serving spirit of his fellow-townsfolk. It had again and again happened to him that, when making hasty purchases in the brief interval between school hours, the shopman would leave him, his business but half done, to attend bareheaded upon some lazy dowager in her carriage, and, in the case of young girls similarly cushioned, insult seemed added to injury. Again, as we all know, our friends treat us, shabby as we are, on the level with the rest of their guests. But when did society, especially that section of it which wears livery, fail to find us out? Dollar had more than once been inclined to throw some rich friend's flunkey downstairs for the suspicious glances cast at him. But heaven forbid that we should appear to confine snobbery to the kitchen! It flourishes equally in the salon, and is found to perfection among well-bred people. The Rev. Mr. Dollar reflected cheerfully that henceforth when he entered a drawing-room, those in it would at once show an alert consciousness of his presence. The difference between a millionaire and a nobody is nicely indicated here. When Dives crosses the threshold, there is a just perceptible flutter; even the mistress's pet poodle,

by intuition, wags its tail. When Nobody comes, the silk gown does not rustle, and there is no wag of her pet's tail. These may seem bagatelles, and indeed they are; but just as field mice, by gnawing the bow-strings of the Assyrian army, enabled the enemy to obtain an easy victory, so will trifling checks and annoyances often destroy a noble nature. Mr. Dollar saw, as clearly as any man could see, the unlovely, sordid side of money, but, nevertheless, he realized by slow-bought and bitter experience the value of wealth in enabling us to make the best of ourselves. Be as lofty-minded as we please, we are yet constrained to accept the world's standard as we accept its mintage till a better one be found.

From generalities to further particulars:—

In his fortieth year the Rev. Mr. Dollar could hardly accuse himself of an extravagance. The virtue might have been obligatory, but it was a virtue, nevertheless. He naturally possessed fastidious tastes. He liked, for instance, a glass of good wine, the glitter of ancestral plate on the board; the science of cooking was extremely interesting to him—his health, he felt sure, had deteriorated in consequence of poor and often ill-cooked food. The savour of exquisite meats, already flattering his senses, he found very pleasant. But this was one of the least gratifications. For he could now gratify those tastes that really uplifted a man. He could travel, and felt by anticipation the keen interest of a scholar on classic ground, he should listen to the nightingales

at Athens, and follow in the track of Horace and his friend from Rome to Brundusium. Biblical scenes had as strong a fascination for his mind. He would fain tread in the steps of Paul in Pisidia and stand by the ruins of On.

Hitherto he had only been enabled to make one or two of those cheap little Swiss tours by contract, which may be compared to hearing "Fidelio" from the top-most gallery.

Most of us have seen Mont Blanc certainly. But the vulgar company, the crowding, the confusion! Better to behold such marvellous natural scenes by the mind's eye only.

How different travel that takes no account of the cost! Ah! the mind is refreshed, the body invigorated then.

To lounge at will through foreign picture galleries, to float idly in gondolas, to be in no hurry to reach enchanted spots, under no obligation to tear oneself away. The gist of travel is surely here, to be able to take it as we should take nature, when we are in the humour. Then he thought of another luxury.

He was a lover of books. He was almost a biblio-grapher to boot. But he had never yet been able to indulge in this taste except on the most limited scale. There were books he had sighed for as a girl sighs for a lover—not at all costly ones either—yet they had seemed as far off yesterday as they had done twenty years before. Again—and any poor possessor of a

library will sympathize with him—the cover of a book was a matter he had great respect for. He hated to see a good book ill-bound. He adored fine editions, but where he could not have them, handsome bindings. It savoured to him of disrespect to see a grand old author out at elbow, threadbare, and tumbling to pieces. What joy to have the faithful friends of so many years at last bedight as became them! It ever cost him a pang to see the great authors of the world in ill condition, how much more so when they were his own! It seemed a downright slight on his part. Homer, Cervantes, Milton, Spenser, should now be superbly yet staidly bound in that dark blue morocco, with silk lining, that so well became them; his mind glowed with pleasure at this perspective translation of his library. He possessed a really handsome one, but in a terribly dilapidated condition from sheer want of money. On the whole, perhaps, this thought was more animating than any other. A lonely man, a scholar, he had hitherto held more communion with the dead than the living.

He had never envied his rich friends their equipages, fine horses, parks, and establishments, but he had coveted their libraries, especially those of non-reading men. And it is all very well to sermonize on Béranger's text, "Voir, c'est avoir;" more practical wisdom lies in Touchstone's dictum, "'Tis a poor thing, but 'tis my own." All of us would fain own Horace's portion, especially in the matter of books. In his eagerness

Mr. Dollar even took out a note-book and began to put down the names of those time-honoured favourites destined for binding, to cost a guinea apiece. He was thus jotting one name after another when the door was opened with a solemnity that could announce one piece of news only.

The heart of the new-made millionaire stood still.

It was one of the physicians who had been in attendance on the sick man. He looked at Mr. Dollar curiously and paused.

Then he said slowly, and with a touch of meaning impossible to be misunderstood:

"An extraordinary, almost phenomenal change has happened. My patient shows signs of returning consciousness and vitality. For the moment, the danger is over!"

He seemed hardly to expect an answer, and his listener had none to give. He added, "In this kind of disease such changes are not unheard of, though most rare. I have throughout my professional career witnessed not more than one or two such apparently miraculous recoveries, never one more startling than the present."

He was bent on apologizing for the life thus snatched from the grave.

But no apology was needed. The schoolmaster's cynicism stood him in good stead. The irony of this circumstance was but one bitter touch more added to his life.

He smiled somewhat grimly, but with perfect aplomb, without the slightest change of countenance, made reply,—

"Then there can be no reason for the prolongation of my stay. I will take the next train home."

"Your professional duties doubtless claim you," said the physician, and as there seemed nothing more to say he went away, urging Dollar to ring for hot coffee before starting.

"All the household are astir," he said; "and what a hurry our neighbours are in to bury us! I have had to send away half-a-dozen undertakers already."

The cold wintry day had dawned when Mr. Dollar reached the railway station he had quitted barely twenty-four hours ago. What was his dismay on being asked to show his ticket to find it gone! Then he smiled grimly once more. He had thrown the half of his return ticket into the fire, with the thought it was not in accordance with the fitness of things that a millionaire should travel third class.

So the Rev. John Humphrey Dollar went back to his school drudgery and his unbound books, and the hale sexagenarian took to himself a young wife. And at the end of twelve months a son and heir was born to the rich man, and the poor man's dream of millions vanished for ever.

But not without leaving a trace behind. When the patient quite recovered his health, and learned down to the minutest particulars what had taken place, his heart

smote him. He ought not to have come back to life again! He was touched in a vulnerable place, as he adored wealth; besides, John Humphrey Dollar was his kinsman, and, though a needy man, had never come to him for a farthing. The poor fellow should no longer grind at school work for two hundred a year.

It was, moreover, a respectable thing to have a relation in the Church. He presented the Rev. Mr. Dollar, therefore, with a living in an agreeable midland county.

Mr. Dollar would never ride through green lanes by the Lady Felicia's side. But he married her all the same. He did not pension off half-a-dozen of his needy friends, but he supplied his old college tutor with chicken and Madeira. He did not become the possessor of a superb library, but he sent his books to the binder.

A ROMANCE OF THE CLOISTER.

A ROMANCE OF THE CLOISTER.

JUST outside the quaint little Franc-Comtois town of St. Aubin-aux-Ailes, nestled amid its vine-clad hills, stand the Protestant church and parsonage and the house of the cloistered Carmelites. As if symbolizing the friendly, or at least, neutral attitude of two congregations, one at such deadly enmity, the straggling garden of the presbytery touched the walled-in recreation ground of the convent. The shouts of the pastor's children at play must often have reached the white-robed sisters as they took daily exercise; but whilst from their loftier windows they could if so minded watch the movements of their neighbours, no eye, ever so curious, could penetrate the feminine Bastille to which a score-and-odd of human entities had voluntarily consigned themselves. Automatic figures in light draperies could be occasionally discerned amidst the foliage. That was all.

The little chapel attached to the convent was, however, accessible to the outer world. It stood within a few yards of the road, and the iron gate, fast locked and bolted at other times, was thrown open during mass and vespers. Stray worshippers and inquisitive idlers

might then see the cloistered nuns, sitting mute as statues behind the iron screen that divided them from the rest. Were they young, withered, ecstatic or despairing? Who could tell? Service over, they hastily disappeared, as if glad to have the prison door closed upon them once more; that brief reminder of a world to which they were dead against got over. Before the open church doors stretched the high road, the quietest imaginable; yet the rural postmen trudged by, bearing glad and sorrowful news to the humblest home; cheery peasants might be seen wending their way to market; happy lovers sauntering arm-in-arm; and, ever and anon, the white cloud of the distant railway speeding towards Paris or Geneva. And close at hand, too, lay St. Aubin; a mere townling; nothing to be called excitement stirring its quiet streets; the daily routine of existence repeating itself with clock-like monotony throughout the year. But the roar of a modern Babylon, the near neighbourhood of Paris itself were hardly more contrasted with the death-in-life of the Carmelite convent.

I.

In the month of May, with an irony that could only escape the stray mystic or would-be Saint Theresa, this living tomb was turned into a fairyland of flowers. It is the month consecrated by the Catholic Church to the Virgin, when magnificent floral displays and costly musical services attract vast multitudes to the cathedral, and the smallest church wears a festive look. Whilst

the convents are decorated from end to end with garlands and enormous bouquets are placed under each image or portrait of Mary, it is on the chapels attached that the nuns now expend all their energies. The Carmelites of St. Aubin were celebrated for such shows, and from the first of May to the first of June the village folk flocked to their services.

On the eve of final preparation, just five years ago, a blue-bloused carpenter was still hammering away in the deserted interior, adding fresh-gathered exotics to the festoons adorning the high altar.

At the foot of his ladder stood two nuns, who handed him camellias and magnolias from time to time, giving directions. The pure spring twilight gradually faded, one basket of flowers was emptied after another, but the work went on.

"We need not wait any longer," at last said the elder of the two sisters wearily. "You quite understand what is to be done," she added, addressing herself to the workman.

"Quite, my sister," was the alert reply. He also was wearied, that poor carpenter; he had been at work since five o'clock in the morning and now longed to be rid of his monitresses in order to enjoy just a tiny cigarette under the organ-loft.

The pair of homely, florid, not discontented-looking women bustled off. They were lay sisters—that is to say, they were bound by no final vows—on whom, with others under the Superior's orders, devolved the do-

mestic concerns of the convent. But the workman had hardly glanced round to assure himself that he was alone, when there crept forth from some hiding-place a timid, cowering creature whose features he could not distinguish in the gathering gloom.

Only a woman's voice at once betrayed the intruder and her errand. With a whispered word or two, no more, he was suddenly transported from his careless mood into a world of acutest suffering. A small, weak woman's world, it is true, but none the less real and moving. It was as if some poor hunted animal had found him out and was trying to make known a horrible story of persecution and despair.

"You are young, your face is kind," cried the supplicant, twining her thin, ice-cold fingers about his own. "Save me from dying over and over again before my hour is come, from curses that only blacken my own soul. Oh," she added with a suppressed wail, "this earth was not made for curses! I am sure of it. God did not create even the worm for suffering."

She glanced round fearfully, then gasped out under her breath:

"It must be to-night; my escape, I mean. Everyone is tired out and will sleep heavily. There is a moon. I can steal at midnight unobserved to the outer wall, by the roadside, just opposite the telegraph post. Place your ladder there, inside our garden; the trees and brushwood will make descent easy. Here is all I pos-

sess in the world; but never fear, my parents will reward you well."

She thrust into his reluctant palm something cold and smooth; then vanished as stealthily as she had come.

It was the universal stir and bustle of the floral preparations that had rendered such an interview possible. In preparation for the festival the vast congeries of buildings would be invariably cleaned, repaired and redecorated throughout. The iron screen shutting off the cloistered sisters from the body of the church was in its turn undergoing renovation, for the moment being unhinged and placed against the wall. Through this opening the frightened creature passed now. Lighting a match, the blue-bloused workman, so unexpectedly summoned to play the part of a Rinaldo, examined the pledge: a tiny crucifix of antique pattern, and, as far as he could judge, of solid gold.

"What does it matter?" he said to himself as he carelessly pocketed the trinket. "Gold or no gold, how can I refuse to help a woman in distress? And she has given me no choice, that is the simple truth. I would pay twenty francs to be well rid of the business."

He was quite a young man, and although wearing the blue blouse, without the rough exterior and unpolished manners usually associated with manual labour. His features were regular and beautiful, his form symmetrical and full of easy grace, his hands slender and

well shaped. He wanted, too, the light-hearted gaiety characteristic of the French workman. He did not hum airs or whistle softly over his work, but rather seemed lost in reverie and pensive, questioning thought.

"It may prove a very awkward piece of work for me," he mused, whilst hastily adjusting the last of the bouquets. "Now, if she had asked the Père Rouget, what would a squabble with the Superior be to him, a substantial man, independent of everybody? But the job must of course fall to a poor fellow without a sixpence, and alone in the world. Her parents will reward me well, she said. There is something in that. Who knows, then? out of the scrape may arise a turn of good fortune. Be that as it may, help the poor thing I must. To draw back from a fellow-creature in the hour of need? Never!"

His task done, he collected his tools, shouldered his ladder, and quitted the church. Just then the convent clock struck nine.

"Three hours good in which to make up my mind," he thought, having decided to undertake the championship, yet seeking a loophole for escape. The more and more he pondered, the more desperate seemed the enterprise. Nothing easier, certes, than for him to be at the appointed spot with a ladder. But how would she contrive to escape? A criminal condemned to the guillotine might as well try to elude his goalers as a Carmelite sister to regain her freedom. So, at least, it seemed to him.

II.

THE night was calm and beautiful, yet a superstitious mind might have read evil augury in the heavy clouds veiling the moon from time to time, their dense, purply black masses so strangely contrasted with the piercing, silvery radiance. Never was moonlight more brilliant, never shadows more gloomy. Bodeful, too, sounded the shrill cries of the night owl flitting from tree to tree and the melancholy splash of the stream watering the convent gardens, now much swollen with spring rains. Nature seemed in a sobbing, wailing mood; even the breeze stirring the pine leaves sounded like a human sigh.

Between the outhouses and the wall stretched a vast drying ground, where fluttered newly-washed clothes hung out to dry; on the fruit bushes and shrubs also, with somewhat weird effect, lay long white garments. The timid might easily conjure up a world of ghosts here, the clothes taking grotesquely human forms as the night wind swayed them gently to and fro.

With a calculation and an ingenuity only called forth of despair, the fugitive had chosen for her purpose the one night of the year offering a combination of favourable circumstances. Not only was the entire household worn out with fatigue; not only did the process of house cleaning and renovation necessitate the opening of doors, otherwise barred and bolted; but the great

spring washing, when the clothes remained out-of-doors all night, afforded an additional chance of escape.

Even were some vigilant eye upon the drying-ground, amid the changing lights and shadows and the phantasmagoria of white spectres as the long garments indeed looked, a stealthy figure could easily elude observation. And almost superhuman was the dexterity and absolute noiselessness with which this one had contrived to get so far, having safely stolen from the cell shared with a companion; fortunately for her the heaviest sleeper of the whole community. To glide through a newly white-washed corridor, every window of which stood wide open, to descend a side staircase appropriated to the use of the lay sisters, to boldly cross their dormitory, where all six lay snoring in company, take down from the door the key of the kitchen, thence enter the garden —all this seemed miraculous now it was done. But it had been done!

With beating heart she paused for a moment, at first too wildly thankful to go on, too passionately exultant to realize how much still remained to be accomplished. Murmuring a childish little prayer, raising her rosary to her lips, she crossed the drying-ground, taking care to hide herself between the rows of white linen. Timid as a hare with the pack at its heels, cowering as a fawn within near approach of its pursuers, her pulses afire and breath held close, she hastened towards the meeting-place. In the lightning-like transit, for she flew rather than ran, a thousand apprehensions distracted her mind.

The passage of the garden occupied a few minutes only, yet every instant of suspense seemed a long, weary hour, every step of the way a mile laboriously trodden, and with electric swiftness one agonized question arose after another. Would the counted-on deliverer indeed be there? Would the last, most hazardous feat be accomplished? And that horrible wall once surmounted, should she reach a haven of safety? The nearer her goal, the more delusive and chimerical seemed her hopes. Oh, no! Such over-joy could not, could not be!

The moon was suddenly hid as she reached the meeting-place, and that blessed obscuration made the rest easy. Her trembling fingers felt the rungs of the ladder, a low whisper from above encouraged her to climb. Gently, yet firmly, she is then supported by one pair of arms, whilst by another the ladder is deftly lifted and re-adjusted for the descent. The three get down in safety and the light of a lantern now reveals to the sobbing, too thankful girl that her second deliverer is a woman.

"My landlady, the Mère Michon—Jeanne Marie," exclaimed the young man in a low voice. "I could not manage things alone, and she has a good heart. She pitied you! But quick! let us make haste to hide ourselves and form a plan."

The three hurried on for a few hundred yards, then struck into a by-road, where they soon reached a road-maker's hut, now dark and deserted. Behind stretched a pine wood in which cuttings had been made, and

here, amidst the fallen trunks and chips, the rustic paladin concealed his ladder.

"Now, Jeanne Marie," he said, "you take the sister inside and change her clothes, whilst I keep watch. When you are ready, call me and we will consider what is best to do next."

"There! leave off crying and praying, my dear," cried the rough, warm-hearted peasant woman. "Élie has thought of everything. Here's my best Sunday gown, jacket and hood (you'll think of me when you get home, I know); put this basket on your arm. I packed in a bit of cheese, bread and some cherries to eat on the way. I'm a poor woman, you know, but I never yet did a kind deed without being rewarded twice over. Now, if anyone guesses that you are a nun and not Élie's sister or wife (no offence!) trudging with him to market, it is no acuteness I'll credit them with, but just promptings of the evil one. Come in, Élie, lad; she is all ready."

"Where do your parents live?" he asked. "There is not a moment to lose."

"My name is de Grandval; my home is the Château Grandval, in the Morvan," she replied, her wild exultation for a moment subdued, an expression even of pensiveness stealing over her face. "But who knows? Perhaps I have no longer father or mother living. We are dead to those who love us when once the veil is taken. No message from without reaches that living tomb."

"Dear, dear! you belong to a great family, then; but we might have guessed it from your speech. And all the cloistered sisters do. Ah, where their great dowries go to, who can tell us? Well, you won't forget Jeanne Marie, mademoiselle, I'm sure—and pardon the liberty I'm taking. Here's my smelling bottle in case you feel faint, and just open your mouth for a drop of cordial. You look for all the world like a ghost."

Meantime the young man pondered. When at last he spoke his plan was made out in every detail.

"'Tis a long way, anyhow, and we must take the longest."

He pulled out his purse and counted his little stock of money, two gold pieces and some silver.

"I have a napoleon here; no harm in an extra coin or two; you'll repay me when you get back," put in Jeanne Marie. "And mademoiselle won't forget me."

"I think I have enough, but I'll borrow your twenty-franc piece. As I say, mademoiselle must not travel by railway or any public conveyance for fear of discovery. We shall have to trust to a lift when we can and do the rest on foot. It is fair-time at St. Bertrand, and Bernard, the butcher at the Maison Blanche (you know the hamlet a league off, Jeanne Marie?), will be starting between five and six o'clock. He will carry us so far if his cart is empty. Now, Jeanne Marie, you go back; and next day, if I am inquired for, say I have got a job of work a long way off. I had finished working

at the convent, and was paid, so no one will ask about me there."

"Poor lammie! May you get safe home, darling!" cried the good woman, embracing the fugitive again and again. "Excuse me, mademoiselle; I feel to you as a mother might, and you have a feeling heart, I know. 'Tis little enough I can do for a fellow-creature in distress, but twenty francs are twenty francs, and many a bright gold piece earned in my youth has gone to others never more to return. The gown and the stockings are brand-new, dear; never yet put on. But you won't forget."

"Adieu, Mère Michon, adieu," broke in the young man impatiently. "Be wary; keep your mouth shut."

The girl whispered inarticulate thanks and blessings; then they parted; Jeanne Marie trudging back to the village, the pair making the best of their way through the pine wood.

"It is very lonely here, but there is nothing to be afraid of," the young man said; "and the dawn will soon break. Our way will seem shorter when we can look about us."

"Oh, I fear nothing—with you," was the passionately grateful reply. "You are strong, you have a commanding voice, you would never let me be forced back to the convent."

"Make your mind easy," he said lightly; then, as if to beguile the tedium of the road, he whistled in perfect time one simple air after another. By-and-by the sweet,

bird-like notes ceased and both plodded on without a word.

They had enough to think about. "Who can tell?" reflected Élie. "Dame Fortune may at last have rapped at the door of the foundling, the nobody's son, the castaway. I have done my best to rise in the world, but it is hard when you have no friends, no money, no name even to start with. This rich man will surely befriend his daughter's deliverer. Who knows? Perhaps he will help me to Algérie, where I might make a man of myself."

His companion's thoughts were far less clear and connected. Life, that is life indeed, was coming back slowly to her as to a prisoner after long incarceration. One by one, dulled senses reasserting themselves; long-stifled volitions making themselves felt within her breast. Eight years of the cloister had turned her into a living, breathing automaton—a human machine. Three hours of life sufficed to recall the sympathetic creature—the woman.

Gradually the pure, pale light showed the lofty pine tops; twitterings of countless birds, lauds of the woodland, greeted the dawn. Soon the sweet spring landscape lay before them, fresh and bright as in a picture. Emerging from the wood they beheld emerald green Alp and pasturing herds; perched here and there a rustic châlet, the cheese-maker's home in summer. Below, a scattered hamlet, amid cornfields and vineyards; and

far away, crest upon crest of undulating forest—the pine-clad peaks of the Jura.

III.

THE sun was high when Étiennette de Grandval—such was the real name of Sister Pauline—awoke from a long, heavy, dreamless sleep. What had befallen her? Where was she?

The night's adventure now came back. The flight from the convent; the tramp with her sturdy champion through the pine-wood; the butcher's cart in which she had lain down to rest. They must have arrived long ago, for the sun now shone due south and the drive was to have lasted three hours only. She half rose from the heap of fresh straw and glanced around. The cart had been drawn under a tree for coolness and quiet at some little distance from the other vehicles. Dozens were there, whilst immediately about the inn all was bustle and excitement. Far adown the street she saw above the housetops an ancient cathedral tower, and close under its walls a dazzling, bewildering scene—flags flying, glittering toy-booths and tents, with streams of country folk keeping holiday. Strains of merry music and a joyous hum of voices reached her ear. For a while she gazed blankly, a weight oppressing her heart. She seemed to have burst the cerements of the grave, to have quitted wraiths and shadows for this living, moving company. Should she ever feel one of them again? The presence of her companion broke the spell.

That honest, kindly glance, that helpful, decided voice, humanized her, made her feel herself, a being not only sympathized with but sympathetic.

"I have breakfasted long ago; you had better come indoors and eat something too," he said; "then we must be on the move again."

He helped her to get down, not in the least understanding her wistful looks. Again and again she glanced towards the fair, began to speak, and stopped short.

"Have no fear," he whispered, "no one is on your track here. This is the last place that would be suspected."

"I was not thinking of that," she said, a faint blush overspreading her thin, sallow cheeks, "but of yonder booths. Might I just walk through them—not to purchase anything, of course—but merely to look on? It is ten years now since I saw a street or a shop window."

He smiled down pityingly, almost loftily, this blue-bloused peasant, called upon to champion the daughter of an ancient house. The naïveté of the speech made him sensible of the difference between them. They were perhaps nearly of an age, but whilst he was a man she had remained in many things a child. The part of protector banished the wider difference of rank; dignity is an essential characteristic of the French peasant; but, although friendly and brother-like in his solicitude, he was not in the least familiar.

Nodding alert assent, he led her towards fairyland—

such, indeed, it seemed to the dazed, enraptured girl. Eagerly, as the recovered from years of sickness or restored to sight after a long term of blindness, she glanced hither and thither. Now a stall of feminine gew-gaws fascinated her gaze, rainbow-coloured ribbons, trinkets of artificial topaz, sapphire and emerald, so marvellously imitating real gems, kerchiefs of pillow-lace. Now she stood spell-bound before a display of local dainties; Dijon gingerbread tied up in gold paper and bright ribbon, sugar-plums from Flavigny, candied fruits from Auvergne. Here were bagatelles for a maiden's chamber: hand-mirrors, embroidered housewives, pin-cushions of painted velvet, flower-stands, pictures. There glittered glass and porcelain, or those pretty trifles, not useless because they are pretty, known as the "articles de Paris."

"Let me offer you something," the young man said quite naturally. It were surely wanting in good manners not to present his companion with a fairing. Without waiting for consent, and following the direction of her eyes, he immediately fastened upon a pair of delicately perfumed gloves, knitted in fine lavender-coloured silk with fancy borders and tiny silken tassels.

As the gift was placed in her hands, the girl smiled joyously, and that smile, revealing as it did two dimples and small, exquisitely formed teeth, white as ivory, utterly transformed the pale face. Hitherto observers would have set her down as positively ugly, extreme wanness and rigidity and that acquired habit of expres-

sionless impassibility repelling rather than attracting the gazer.

But what will not a smile and a glow of grateful, affectionate happiness effect in any woman's looks? As the young peasant waited whilst she fitted the gloves to her small, slender hands, a slight blush deepened his sunburnt complexion. Those little hands reminded him that she was gently born, the dimples revealed the fact that, if not exactly beautiful, she was very sweet to look upon. And naturally enough under the circumstances, the more openly she expressed her gratitude and regard, the more studiously he avoided anything like indiscretion.

Still they could not trudge on mile after mile in silence. A certain candid intimacy must spring up, whether they would or no.

Élie would forget the formal "Mademoiselle," Étiennette the "Monsieur," with which a high-born French lady addresses a peasant in these days. Although for the most part their talk was of very serious things, little outbursts of gaiety on her part, a grave playfulness on his, lent their confidences a sweetness and endearingness new to both. They were hardly friends; yet with all the enthusiasm of lovers each poured into the other's ear the story of a life.

"What made you unhappy at the convent?" he asked. "Was anyone unkind to you?"

"I blame no one except myself," was the vehement reply. "How could I for a moment believe that I was

fitted for sainthood, martyrdom? But the least alleviation, a little freedom, a glimpse of joy, would have enabled me to endure to the end. The lay sisters seemed to me too happy: they were busy, they were free, they had friends. Oh! to live from day to day without hope, to be alive, yet lonely as if already in the tomb; to feel one's brain growing duller and duller with the pain of inanition; one's heart growing stony cold, and the exaltation, the fervour, the communion with Heaven, once aspired to and believed in, a mere delusion, a hollow mockery! Promise me one thing," she cried, turning upon him in an agony of supplication. "You will not let me be forced back to that living grave? You will kill me first?"

"I promise. Here is my hand upon it," he said; and for a little the pair walked hand-in-hand, that close grip of his large, strong fingers reassuring her.

"I wish you were not a workman, that you could always be my friend. I mean that we could often see each other and chat as we are doing now," she began. "But I shall never forget how you have stood by me—never, never. And my parents are rich, they will repay you. Father, mother—these names I was bidden to forget in the cloister—do you know that your own Étiennette is on her way home?"

"Don't cry, my child," the young man put in, kindly reproachful.

"My tears are tears of joy. For they will, they *must* be glad. Yet is it not strange that parents can so give

up their children? It all comes back to me as if happening yesterday. Robed in bridal white, myrtle blossoms in my hair, veiled and gloved, I stood at the grating, myself calm as we made our adieux, all the rest weeping, my poor old Alsatian nurse, Lisbeth, sobbing as if her heart would break. But even that did not move me. I felt so sure in thus breaking every natural tie, trampling underground every natural feeling, that I was fulfilling a Heaven-sent mission; answering —oh! the irony, yes, I can say it to you, the blasphemy of the phrase—a Divine call."

She turned towards him, her pathetic eyes still wet with tears, no reserve possible in this sudden outburst of long pent-up emotions.

"Better far become a peasant's wife, share the burdens of daily life with an honest man like yourself than be doomed to such a fate. But do not let me talk of it any more. Put other thoughts into my head."

Distractions were not wanting. The long glad day seemed almost interminable, each hour of blissful experiences, many rolled into one.

How fair showed this Jura world in early summer! Against the turquoise sky rose ridge upon ridge of bright green larch trees; between the narrow combes or close-shut valleys trended many a crystal stream; whenever they rested in sunny glade, Étiennette made sweet Alpine posies, the small purple clematis, the lily of the valley, the sky-blue hepatica carpeting the way. If they overtook a timber cart, the good-natured moun-

taineers offered them a seat, themselves afoot always as they guided their team round the sharp precipices. Or a trader bent upon purchasing local wares, spectacles at Morez, tops and pipe handles at St. Claude, would take them upon his light cart, shortening many a mile. Étiennette's gentleness and look of fragility, Élie's chivalrous care of her, won the sympathy of all.

"The lass is weary and very pale; will she have a drink of wine?" said one.

"Here, my girl," said another, filling her hands with ripe cherries, "try and put them in your cheeks."

Little kindnesses and courtesies were thus showered upon them as they went. When night came they were far away from the cloister, but farther still from their destination. They rested at a little wayside inn on the borders of a pine forest; beyond that dark rim, the shining, silvery peak of Mont Blanc.

IV.

TOWARDS evening on the fourth day of their travels, the Château Grandval was indeed reached. Étiennette's cheeks flushed with pride as they came in sight of the lordly pile towering over a province. Crowning an eminence, its terraces commanded a view of the entire Morvan—granite peaks, dimpled valleys, curling rivers, smiling hamlets, all lay outspread as in a map. This perfect specimen of mediæval architecture, not debased for feudal purposes, a nobleman's palace but no prison, had suffered little from time, war or change. Perhaps

the early founders of the noble house of de Grandval, could they emerge from the tomb, would find as little moral change, their descendants holding the same beliefs, the same faith, the same prejudices as themselves.

From the porter's lodge a carriage road swept upward through the park. The gates stood wide, and, unperceived, the pair now passed in.

"I am surely expected," Étiennette whispered, "otherwise the park would be closed. And see, a tent is spread on the lawn, servants are bustling about, a banquet is prepared. Yes, it must be so; these rejoicings are for me. But we will steal into the house, escaping notice; I long to weep on my mother's breast."

The tent had been erected at some distance from the principal entrance, and the servants busied in festive preparations did not observe the strangers. The stalwart blue-bloused peasant and his slight companion as they now hurried along the broad carriage road were, moreover, no figures to arouse suspicion. Élie's erect carriage and frank, engaging face would bespeak confidence anywhere. Étiennette's coarse print gown, short black jacket and white coiffe could not conceal a certain look of distinction. Four days of hope, of life indeed, not its woeful parody, had wonderfully transformed her. The cheeks so daintily dimpled, glowed with health, the tender blue eyes shone with quiet happiness, the steps of the tender feet were elastic.

Unhindered, unobserved, they crossed the threshold, Étiennette leading the way, her protector following,

bareheaded. Airily, as a fawn she bounded forward, her lips parted in exultant smile, her arms outspread, the very embodiment of rapturous expectation. They were now in the open doorway of the magnificent reception room, where stood a tall, dignified, white-haired gentleman in evening dress.

"Father," she gasped, out, utterly mastered by overjoy. "It is I, your long-lost child, your own Étiennette."

The figure thus appealed to remained rigid as if cut out of marble. Without stirring an inch, without moving a muscle, the master of the house glanced from the tearful, breathless, rosy-red suppliant to her companion. Had the pathetic appeal been a masquerade, a mere piece of acting, he could not have looked on more icily.

"Unhappy girl," he said. "The first apostate of your family, the first to bring shame on our honoured house! What penitence can now reconcile you with an outraged Church, what tears of agony wipe out the stain? Go back to the convent. Seek the divine pardon and peace of mind in bitterest expiation—"

Just then, ere yet the words had utterly paralyzed the listener, a rustle of silken skirts was heard on the staircase. One low-breathed passionate word only escaped Étiennette's lips—"Mother." Once more she moved forward as if expecting an embrace, again to draw back. This lady dressed like a bride in rich white satin, occupying the mistress's place, was hardly

older than herself. Her father then had become a widower, had married again!

"Be thankful that your mother has been spared this shame," the old man added. "She went to her rest fondly assuring herself of her child's pure intercessions. I attempt no force, remember; you are free to choose between the only safe and honourable asylum open to you, or—beggary. A man cannot dower his daughter twice, cannot receive under his roof a renegade, a perjurer."

He glanced suspiciously at the sad, dignified figure beside the shrinking girl.

"And you, young sir," was the scathing reproof. "Search in your own conscience for the meed of such services. Ask yourself what recompense should await the palterer with the most solemn ordinances, the calculating sacrilegist bent upon gain. I have no more to say."

With a haughty wave of the hand he dismissed them, and but just in time.

Already the guests bidden to welcome home bride and bridegroom had begun to arrive. As the dazed, sorrow-stricken pair now retraced their steps, they met carriage after carriage bearing visitors to the Château in gala dress. What a contrast was presented by these gay, careless new-comers and the castaways passing out! On entering the park a few minutes before, Étiennette had recalled a dozen familiar features with a transport of recognition. The beautiful home had

seemed her own once more. Now, turned like a beggar from her father's doors, she walked with downcast eyes and white face, never looking back.

When they were on the high road, Élie bade her sit down, and opened his wallet. "Let us rest awhile, let us eat something," he said, with affected cheerfulness. Truth to tell, the blow had fallen no less crushingly on himself. Might not this escapade, as it seemed momentarily to him, prove his ruin? He possessed nothing but his good name, the name of an honest workman. That, he felt, he had jeopardized past help. He could not return home in search of employment. Whither, then, should he bend his steps?

But good feeling, a sense of protectiveness, and manly self-reliance soon get the better of these dreary thoughts. And bitter as was his disappointment, affectionate as was his participation of her own, he felt glad that their intercourse had not yet come to an end. This friendship with a gentle, clinging, sensitive woman was the first real intimacy of his life.

"Come," he urged, trying to make her smile through her tears: "If we are not invited to a banquet, we have at least the remains of our breakfast. Just a morsel of bread and a sip of wine, to please me!"

"Not yet; my tears would choke me if I tried to swallow," she said. "I have, then, no father; hearts are turned to stone outside the convent walls. It is not so much for myself I grieve. I can earn my bread as other women do; I have not forgotten the little I

learned at school. But, oh, it will be long, long before I can repay your sacrifices. And that good peasant woman whose very clothes I wear!"

"I have your cross still; if of pure gold it will bring you money for pressing needs," he said. "And I will see what I have left of my own. Could I get to Paris—"

"You will not leave me—at least, not yet?" she cried, clinging to him, refusing to take back her trinket. "If left to myself, who knows, perhaps want would drive me back to the cloister?"

Just then, when with despondency at heart each was trying to cheer and soothe the other, the bent figure of an ancient woman hobbled up. She was dressed in the Alsatian costume; bright kerchief, white stomacher, black skirt bordered with green, and an enormous knot of broad, black ribbon surmounting the small, yellow, wrinkled face.

"Don't look at me; don't speak to me, child; it would break my heart," she said, standing over the amazed girl. "You must remember your nurse, your old Lisbeth? Ah! I went on my knees, begging you not to take the veil; and the death-knell that sounded over you was a death-knell indeed to me. I had no one to love me when my bright Étiennette was shut up in the cloister, dead, buried; dead and buried, so she seemed."

She fumbled at her pocket and brought out a reticule of antique stamped velvet with a silver clasp.

"Look you, darling," she whispered as she leaned on her stick, "I shall have a soft bed to lie on, dainties to eat as long as I live; and when I am dead, never fear, masses in plenty will be said for Lisbeth's soul. But, my master has wedded a young wife; my hoardings shall never go to the child of a stranger. Here, my heart's love, hide it quickly. The bag holds five thousand francs as I live! a little dowry for you. No, don't kiss me; don't let me hear your sweet voice. I am too old to cry. We have parted—but there's the money."

"And whose should it be but yours?" said Étiennette when she had done weeping. "My true, now my only friend, poorly are you repaid even thus."

She thrust the treasure into his unwilling fingers, but it was long before he could stammer out a word of thanks. To the ingenuous mind of the young peasant Lisbeth's gift was nothing short of downright fortune. With five thousand francs a wary man could start as a colonist in Algeria, or, for the matter of that, set up as a market-gardener or dairy-farmer in France. Five thousand francs would make a man of him anywhere.

But another conviction sent the blush to his manly brow and made his heart beat quickly. He was a poor man no longer, and his companion was no longer a great lady.

"Étiennette," he began at last, his strong, rich voice trembling with emotion, "you are alone in the world,

may I not now be your friend? How could I tell you my secret thoughts before? You were an heiress about to re-enter the world, I a poor unlettered workman, earning my bread from day to day. But we are both orphans, outcasts together. I can speak unashamed, and you are free to listen."

He clasped her slender hands in his, drew her nearer to him and whispered, "This wayfaring life of the last few days, has it not been sweet to you as to me? Ah! I have surely guessed aright, though you will not say so. Our bitter disappointment has turned to deepest joy."

She clung closer to him, but the stammering lips got out no word, the tenderly pathetic eyes refused to meet his own. Yes, to her also these wanderings had been a revelation; she understood it all now. She loved too; she, too, was rich indeed. "Never fear," added the shy yet dignified lover, "that you shall feel ashamed of your husband, unlettered rustic though he be. And your white hands shall not be roughened with toil. We will go to Algeria, and take the good Jeanne Marie with us. You shall reign mistress of a dainty home."

With one passionate sentence only she interrupted these fond speeches.

"Give me straw to lie on, dry bread to eat," she cried, "only let me be free, let me be loved! And the prayer is not mine alone but one of many, uttered alas!

in vain. I should be too happy were it not for thoughts of my fellow victims left behind."

So that very night they took train to Marseilles, where Jeanne Marie joined them, and in a few years no settlers were more prosperous than the pair whose strange but true story has just been told.

ISABELLE'S WAITING;

OR, THE ELDRITCH CITY.

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PROLOGUE.

A HEART-BREAKING task had fallen to the share of a young French officer stationed in Algeria.

His friend and comrade, the versatile, affectionate, enthusiastic military engineer, Râoul Rivière, lay dead of sunstroke in the adjoining room; his funeral was to take place at sunset.

Meanwhile, with all possible despatch, his goods and chattels were now to be packed for transmission to France. The young man's eyes were red with weeping, and every object around but heightened his grief: the pianette the accomplished musician contrived to carry wherever he went, the dashing water-colour sketches with which he had adorned his walls, the small case of books in French, English, and Italian, each giving evidence of fastidious literary taste, the numerous little works of art collected during his travels.

This poor lodging in a semi-French, semi-Arab town, on the borders of the Great Sahara, was a tiny temple

dedicated to beauty. A few years ago nothing easier than to recall Haroun-El-Raschid in out-of-the-way spots of French Africa. Every piece of furniture was here a gem of Eastern art or handicraft, from the antique lamp fastened to the ceiling, to the mellow-tinted carpets, work of Moorish weavers not as yet vitiated by orders from Manchester.

These rich and lovely things were now ownerless, and as the young Captain removed each from its place with loving hands his tears fell afresh. Once or twice he quitted his post to enter the inner room, and there, drawing aside the cerecloths, gaze on the face of his dead friend.

"For this were we born!" he murmured, contrasting the scene before him with the recollection of two days before. Then those rigid hands had glided over the keys, making the place alive with music; those eyes, now closed for ever, had beamed with intensest enjoyment of life; from those pale blue lips had fallen flashes of wit, happy conceits, suggestions, all his own. A few hours later, and even the little left of this glorious young career would have vanished. A stone crucifix recording name, birth and demise in a spot on the outskirts of civilization, would preserve the memory of Râoul Rivière—for whom?

"It is hard, too hard," mused the survivor, fortunately having scant leisure for grief. With rough tenderness and soldierly precision he continued his business, soon turning the elegant little room into chaos and desolation.

All was finished in time for the last sad scene. It is not easy to lend anything like pomp to a military funeral under such circumstances, but perhaps this one seemed less sordid to outsiders than to the solitary mourner. Why such indecent haste and sacrilegious bustle, such poverty of ceremonical and cold routine?

Priest, acolyte and chorister boys now hurried towards the death-chamber, a crumpled white cloth was thrown over the denuded dressing table, two wax candles were lighted, then with indecorous swiftness and unconcern, the preliminary prayers were got through. The tawdriness of the preparations, the soiled robe of the officiating priest, the dingy vestments of the assistants, hastily flung over their ordinary working apparel, the utter absence of solemnity and feeling, gave the Captain a keener pang than even the realization of his friend's death. More hastily than words can describe, the coffin was now fastened down, a tattered, faded Tricolour arranged as a pall, on it the young officer's uniform was folded, and six bronzed French soldiers in Zouave costume put their shoulders to the burden.

Without, had gathered a motley little crowd, their deep-hued complexions and gay dresses conspicuous in the glow of wondrous sunset. On the opposite side of the road a detachment of shabby-looking soldiery, headed by their commandant, awaited the body. Bedouin children, beautiful as angels, impudent as Parisian gamins, clung to the lintels, only prevented from making a rush within in hopes of petty plunder

by the Zouaves keeping guard above; with arms akimbo and expressions of mingled curiosity and contempt, stared Arabs, here glowering with the fierceness of the desert; mingled with these, Jews, Negroes, and Kabyles, the graduated scale of complexion varying from deepest olive and walnut brown to jet black.

Priest and acolyte, not too reverentially received, made unceremonious way through the rabble; and the Captain, hastily donning sword and képi, following coffin and bearers, came last. Noisily turning the key and pocketing it with a meaning look at the would-be pilferers, he joined his chief outside; then, muffled drums and mournful music sounding, the little procession moved off, followed by picturesque stragglers.

A wilder scene could hardly be imagined; never, certes, did Christian burial take place under stranger, more savage circumstances!

As the funeral train gradually wound upwards from the street, a wide, monotonous, yet grandiose panorama opened to view.

Far as the eye could reach stretched sweep upon sweep of steppe, apparently interminable threshold of the interminable desert. Beyond these plateaux of waving grass and reeds, hundreds of thousands of acres as yet held in undisputed possession by the Bedouin, lay the great Sahara, itself no more of a mystery than the bordering, trackless wastes, all of subdued yet resplendent tints in brown and gold.

This evening an intense effulgence filled heaven

and earth, the sky of pure amber, the wilderness showing ripples of orange and purple on the umbered surface. Here sheep pasturing in the foreground looked like little lumps of rich gold; there the dark tents of the shepherd broke the brown uniformity.

Contrasted with the landscape, wild, romantic, and lovely as any ever ready to the painter's hand, was the little town, a congeries of nondescript buildings without pretensions either to grace, hygiene or comfort. Low one-storied tenements of Jew or negro vendors, Moorish dwellings presenting a blank, white, windowless wall to the street; French cabarets with the usual green shutters, oleanders and pomegranates in pots, round tables before the door; a formal, brand-new barrack, from which waved the Tricolour; a church equally new and unattractive. That was all.

Beyond the little suburban boulevard, on a hillside fronting the great plateaux and the desert, lay the cemetery, of a few years' date only, nevertheless sprinkled with cheap wooden crosses painted blue and grey, and hung with black and white or yellow wreaths. Here and there were new-made graves, piled with huge stones, defences against the ghoul-like jackals and hyenas, midnight depredators in the sacred enclosure.

Faint atmosphere of sacredness seemed to hover about the place in the eyes of the sullen, dry-eyed mourner. He wept for his lost comrade no longer, sentiment were here wholly out of keeping. The commandant wore an absent look of regret, he could but

mourn the premature death of so gifted and promising a soldier; his men were subdued also, the same fate might befall any one of themselves to-morrow. As to the other spectators, they testified no more emotion than if the horse of the young military engineer, instead of its owner, were about to be laid to final rest.

Next morning, weary, dispirited, out of heart with his lot, the Captain was sipping his coffee, when a tap at the door aroused him.

"My Captain," said the intruder, the military servant of his dead friend, "after we had nailed down the cases and cleared my master's room last night, we found this behind the piano."

Here he produced a sketch book.

"As the luggage had to be despatched at daybreak, I thought it best to bring the book to you. You will see it is of no value, only a few daubs. You will do as you think fit about sending it to France, the commandant says."

"Thank you, my good Jean. Here," the young man said, giving the bearer a two-franc piece. The sight of the album and the feeling that it was his own cheered his dreary mood. The sketches might be of the hastiest, they would give his friend's impressions, however fugitive; recollections of happy, vivid moments. The posthumous gift seemed in some degree to soften the bitterness of parting. The sight of the water-colour drawings would not only bring back the sketcher's moods, but also something of himself. With a sob rising to his throat, he opened the volume.

The first two or three leaves were turned with careless sadness. He was hardly in the humour to admire, much less to criticize; but he soon found his attention riveted by the strange, almost unearthly beauty of the scenes portrayed—scenes unreal in the sense of being utterly unlike anything familiar to him, at the same time informed with the realism of natural beauty. A cursory glance convinced him that every one of the fairy-like sites had been beheld by the eye, and were no mere phantasies of poetic imaginaton run riot.

The pictures were evidently a series, illustrating different phases and aspects of the same place. The beholder hardly knew which was most bewildering, the ethereal beauty of outline, or colour.

It was a city exquisite as Venice, but without her lagunes; perfect as Athens, yet towering over no blue Ægean; august as Granada, although no Vega lay stretched at its feet.

The silhouettes, airy, graceful, colossal, proclaimed no especial civilization, whilst the prevailing tints, delicate blue greys and purest azure, indicated a transparence of atmosphere equally hard to identify. This mysterious metropolis seemed to possess a climate as well as an architecture of its own. The columns, towers, and pinnacles of silvery amethystine hue were interspersed with hanging gardens, lawny spaces and bosquets of dazzling gold green; the very citadel and lines of outer fortifications were tapestried with verdure. And skilfully indeed had the artist caught the trans-

lucence and limpidity of the light and the subdued brilliance of the pile; raised by whom? for whom?

This strange, yet real city appeared to be utterly unpeopled; nowhere could the eye detect sign of life or animation; no sentry patrolled the battlements, no citizens thronged the market-place, no children disported in the squares.

Was it some place on which a curse had fallen, some capital edified in strength and beauty, afterwards found unfit for habitation?

Fascinated, spellbound, the Captain searched in vain for any hint of identification. But none was to be found. Not a name, not a date was pencilled on the margin; odd that his friend should never so much as have alluded to this experience, have allowed such a souvenir to gather dust behind a piano!

He mused and mused without being able to arrive at any satisfactory conclusion. The young military engineer had travelled in France and the Algerian colonies, but not elsewhere that he knew of, and no recollections of his own helped him to an identification of the site. Did it indeed possess a local habitation and a name? Was it, after all, the mere conjuring up of imagination?

Another solution offered itself. Râoul Rivière, without being in the least degree superstitious, had possessed a morbid inclination for the weird and the marvellous. Certain impressions and experiences he seldom alluded to, because of their very intensity. Might not this

mysterious city be connected in his mind with thoughts, dreams, or events, too solemn for confidence? Perhaps it was connected with some page of his own history! Again, the friendship so precious to both had been of a few months' standing only. Whilst much was told on either side, much, doubtless, remained to tell.

Whatever the nature of the riddle, the Captain determined to solve it if, indeed, solution were possible. For days, nay, weeks, the mysterious sketches occupied his thoughts when, quite unexpectedly, his regiment was ordered back to France.

I.

BARELY twelve months before, André had brought his bride home, and never adoring husband wore a sadder face. This blue-eyed, comely, not unprosperous young peasant, wedded for dear love's sake rather than for worldly considerations was slowly awaking from a delusively fair dream.

His peerless Isabelle, the beautiful, spirited girl, transplanted from a bright, animated southern town to this remote region, drooped like a flower in uncongenial soil. All had welcomed her kindly; the grandmother and grand-aunts, the widowed, disabled uncle, the somewhat uncouth young brothers; but her persistent waywardness—so all regarded it—was gradually transforming these new-made relations into enemies. How should he bear it if the whole household turned against his darling, and worse still, she turned against himself?

It was a superb morning of late summer, and in cool, delicious tints of blue and grey stood out every feature of the wild landscape, a veritable bit of desert eerie in unfamiliar eyes. Yet in those of its youthful possessor, commonplace enough! André had been reared amid these solitudes. Neither when covered by the snowy pall of the Siberian winter, nor amid the blinding glare and barrenness of harvest-time, did this stern yet matchless nature awe or terrify him. Truth to tell, the real spirit of the place had never entered his soul. The rigid climate of these lofty limestone table-lands and dreary wastes were accepted by him as matters of course. Only for his young wife's sake did he now wish everything changed; in sight, a neat village, pleasant meadows, babbling brooks, peach and olive orchards, roses and oleanders, as in her native Provence.

The country was the strangest conceivable; as yet a terra incognita even to native geographers.

Yon gloomy heights, rising like mountains from the plain, are no mountains indeed, but the lofty steppes of Central France, or Causses, so-called; a name unintelligible except in their immediate vicinity. As dread giants keeping watch over the portals of the world towered the dread Causse Noir and the hardly less formidable Causse Méjean, their broad summits on a level with the peaks of the distant Cévennes, their dark flanks running perpendicularly to the level below.

Opposite, the horizon was bounded by blue ranges,

the far-off chains of the Cantal and Auvergne, whilst nearer rose the purple shadow of what seemed a majestic castellated city. The Nineveh of the desert—Babylon of the trackless waste—was the most conspicuous feature of a landscape unrivalled throughout France.

From far and wide its grandiose silhouette could be discerned, now lightsome, golden, airy as the summer cloudage above, now sombre and frowning as the Causses, its neighbours. And nothing could be more solitary or steppe-like than the wilderness separating them; not a spire, not a roof in sight; only wave upon wave of stony undulation; here and there a few sheep browsing on the scant herbage, or a patch of bright green rye or potatoes breaking the grey monotony.

In the midst of this enormous panorama, solitary as an eagle's nest in the cliffs, and as hard to find to the uninitiated, lay the young farmer's homestead, no smiling abode, certainly, for a fastidious, town-bred bride.

The house was a straggling, whitewashed, barn-like building, only approached from the high road, miles away, by a cart-track or traverse winding amid the rocks. The pedestrian would come all at once upon the gardenless, graceless place; close to the front door, a dung-hill; over against these the farm-yard, cattle-stalls and pig-styes, the poultry walking uninvited into the large, smoke-browned kitchen. The construction was solid, and from October to May a wood fire blazed on the hearth. The pot was ever replenished with flesh and fowl; from the ceiling hung huge flitches of bacon;

the ancient oak presses were piled with coarse home-spun linen. Home-made liqueurs and jellies stood on the cupboard shelf. These and other evidences of well-being were not calculated to satisfy the aspirations of a girl accustomed to mirrors, pet birds in gilded cages, carpets and other luxuries.

It was Sunday, but no tinkle of church bells could be heard against these wastes. Life at the farm went on as usual, the only difference being that a piece of meat was spitted before the fire, less activity reigned without and within, one and all drowsed in winter and strolled abroad in summer. "If there were only a church within reach!" ofttimes sighed Isabelle.

The nearest hamlet lay five miles off, and church-going was therefore impracticable during eight months of the year on account of the snow. A ten-mile walk under ordinary circumstances were no impossible feat, even to a town-bred maiden; but the greater part of the way lay across a scorching, unsheltered plain, the sharp bebbles laming the feet, and the rays of the sun pouring down blindlingly. No mass meant no real Sunday; in other words, no putting on of best clothes or saunter with neighbours, bands playing, pedlars' stalls glittering, cafés inviting to lemonade and cakes.

The weird beauty of the scene, the inexpressibly exhilarating air, the wealth of field flowers around might have offered compensation to some minds; on this especial morning even André drank in cheerfulness with the promise of the day, and felt that Isabelle must

do so too. After a turn round the farm-yard-—on his younger brothers, Charles and Jean, devolved the duty of feeding the cattle and poulty—he re-entered the kitchen.

Two ancient women, still adhering to the costume of the country, sat on low, three-cornered stools, ladling out their morning soup. Almost witch-like was their appearance, their high black head-dresses and stiff bodices, after the manner of stays, recalling local fashions of a hundred years before.

"Where is Isabelle?" asked the young man, as he helped himself to a plateful of soup and sat down by the pair.

"Where is Isabelle?" scornfully repeated the great-aunt, the elder and severer of the two sisters. "Listen, André, your conduct is not that of a man. It is spiritless, idiotic, to put up with such behaviour from a wife; a girl, too, who did not bring you so much as a half-penny."

"There is no harm in lying abed an hour later on Sunday," rejoined the grandmother. "The day is long enough, Heaven knows! But 'tis so all the week. Your wife is crueller to herself than to you, my poor André. Look at her pale cheeks. She is fretting herself into the grave."

"And for what?" put in the other, perhaps with pardonable viciousness. "Because she has the best husband ever girl was blest with, a good home, plenty to eat and drink—bah! it makes me sick, these whims

and fancies. Pluck up your spirit, André; speak out as a man, a husband, should!"

Just then a woman's gown rustled on the bare staircase, and Isabelle entered the kitchen.

No greeting passed between the young wife and her husband's relations. The two old women went on with their soup, never once looking up, whilst Isabelle sulkily received her portion from André's hands.

She was a strikingly handsome girl, with the beautiful features and rich colouring of the South, but a veritable Cinderella in the matter of personal appearance. Her splendid hair was slipping from the comb, her black stuff gown was blue with wear and sadly needed a darn here and there; the very genius of a Frenchwoman, instinctive, exquisite neatness, found among all ranks, was wholly wanting. She seemed to delight in obscuring the radiant loveliness with which she had been endowed: glorious eyes and complexion, faultlessly-shaped nose and mouth, perfect little teeth, and a slender, graceful figure.

As she swallowed her soup, André watched her narrowly. His grandmother's words made him more anxious than ever. Was his Isabelle really pining away, really ill? He noticed that her complexion wanted its usual glow, and that her ugly black dress hung more loosely than ever about the light, girlish limbs. She had grown quieter, too, of late, less aggressive towards the grandmother and grand-aunt, more for-

bearing with the young brothers. What did these signs mean?

Just then a pair of hobbledehoys entered, good-looking, well-meaning young fellows, but apt to tease their unsympathetic, at times haughty sister-in-law.

"We are going to the fair," began Charles defiantly, keeping his eye fixed on Jean.

"We are going to the fair," repeated Jean in the same tone of determination.

Like dogs these two ever concerted mischief in company, relying on each other's support for the carrying out of their plans.

"Young men used to go to mass o' Sundays when I was a girl," put in the grand-aunt, "and save their money instead of spending it on peep-shows and low company."

"Why not wait till the hay is got in?" added the grandmother. "What good will you two be to-morrow after walking to Millau and back?"

André glanced at the pensive figure of Isabelle.

"The young horse has done little or no work this week. I've a mind to drive to the fair, if Isabelle would like to go," he said.

Isabelle shook her head, whereupon the two young men imitated the gesture with peals of laughter.

"That is Isabelle's way," began Charles, the livelier and more malicious of the two. "And so it would be at the fair. Will you have a turn in the merry-go-round? Shake of the head. Will you have some ginger-

bread? Shake of the head number two. Will you walk, sit down, stay a little longer, or go straight home? Shake of the head."

Jean was about to continue his brother's mimicry when André ended the scene: yielding, affectionate, good-natured as he was, he seldom asserted his authority except when Isabelle's name was dragged into a family dispute.

"Look you," he said. "A single syllable more and I'll lock you both in the empty stable till nightfall. Unmannerly cubs that you are. 'Tis a mercy you will both have to go off in a year a'soldiering."

Both culprits hung their heads abashed, and the ancient women held their peace. André might be right or wrong, but he was here indisputably the master. Their basins of soup emptied, the lads stole away to prepare for the day's expedition. The old ladies busied themselves with housework. The husband and wife were left alone.

II.

He eyed her anxiously as physician some precious patient, and at last asked in the gentlest voice:

"Why won't you go to the fair with me? Why will you say no to everything I propose?"

The girl's beautiful head was bowed sullenly; without looking up, she jerked out a wilful reply.

"Take no notice of me; I cannot change myself. And you know what I said on our wedding-day. I

would be happy with you if I could. It is not my fault if I am wretched here."

The young man's candid blue eyes filled with tears. Yes, he remembered those words but too well. The misprized, orphaned, portionless Isabelle had accepted his love, his name, his fortunes with the cold promise —she would be happy with him if she could. And for a few brief, to him inexpressibly exquisite, weeks the pact was kept. His unsparing devotion and self-sacrifice in little things were rewarded by gaiety, liking, even affection. She was evidently learning to love him and be happy, when a sudden, inexplicable change occurred. That sparkling, winning apparition, who had even obtained favour in the eyes of the stern grand-dames, and rough homage from her young brothers-in-law, vanished as completely as if the earth had swallowed her up. In her place there moved a pale, drooping, self-centred figure, mute as a mother bereft of her first-born, dejected as maiden whose lover lies in the tomb.

"You mope too much indoors," he went on. "You should get all the fresh air you can whilst the fine weather lasts. Come, fetch your hat. Let us take a turn together."

Isabelle obeyed mechanically.

It was no summer world to her, but assent seemed easier than discussion. They set off in silence. A comelier pair it were hard to find on a French Sunday. If André's face lacked the brilliant colouring and subtle

charm of her Southern type, it offered more candour and sweetness of expression. There was a fine glow of health about his sunburnt complexion, whilst his eyes, of deep, soft blue, showed child-like ingenuousness and trust. The features were regular, as is generally the case in these regions, and the form manly, symmetrical and well knit.

These youthful figures, so well matched in point of age, beauty, and social condition, should have made the joyfullest picture imaginable; in reality, none could be sadder. A burden of care weighed down the husband's naturally buoyant spirits, whilst the wife looked as one who felt herself under a curse doomed to suffer and cause suffering without fault of her own. They walked side by side, downcast and spiritless.

"We will have a look at the city," he said.

"Oh, André, why go there?" she exclaimed, with an expression of indescribable shrinking.

"Whither, then?" was the careless rejoinder.

Whither, indeed? Here were no green lanes or umbrageous meadows, no olive groves or peach orchards by meandering streams, as in her own sunny land. Instead, the dark, frowning Causses, the rocky and waterless wilderness, and the Eldritch—the accursed City.

Following a narrow path across potato fields and patches of buck-wheat and rye, they were soon in the midst of a stony, flowery, absolutely unpeopled waste.

The farm-buildings were now hidden by masses of rock rising on every side, no longer mere stones to be

wrenched by the ploughman, but huge columnar piles recalling the mystic alleys of Carnac and Stonehenge. Here and there the grey surface was tapestried with dazzlingly brilliant green which, with the wreath of wild flowers around, softened the prevailing savagery. Everywhere abounded the wild lavender, its delicious fragrance filling the air, the colour of its silvery spikes in perfect harmony with the rocks.

Strange and beautiful as was this scene, crags sparkling as crystal, verdure bright as gold, lavendered sweeps, and far away and around the towering Causses and the Cévennes, it but formed the prelude of witchery to come.

Plodding along for another quarter of an hour, now across a bit of ploughed land, now over stony pasture, the tremendous shadow of the Eldritch City straight before them, they suddenly found themselves under its very walls: above, hanging gardens, domes, pinnacles and battlements; around, vistas of street and public promenade; the whole of lustrous silvery rock, shining against a warm, southern sky.

"Take my hand, my girl," said André, "and let us clamber to yonder terrace. The air is good to breathe there."

Tired of perpetual resistance, Isabelle obeyed; André, agile as Tyrolese goatherd, helping her up the giddy stair.

Huge blocks of limestone here met, with yawning fissures and break-neck clefts between. The task of

bestriding these chasms, so full of danger to a stranger, was mere child's play to the young farmer. Isabelle clung to him, and in a few minutes later, breathless and heated, they reached a grassy platform, high as cathedral spire above the level. What a scene here met their unbewildered, irresponsive eyes! The broad earth could show none fairer.

Familiar lines and harmonies were here replaced by forms and tints of unimaginable airiness and delicacy. Nothing, not even the turf carpeting the untrodden ways, recalled the world of every day. The very heavens seemed to possess a new, indescribable transparence and loveliness, whilst proudly rising under the golden and sapphire canopy stood a city more beautiful than any reared by mortal hands.

It covered an enormous area this metropolis of the waste. Perched on their lofty pinnacle, the two careless beholders could now obtain a bird's-eye view of the whole. In the pearly, translucent atmosphere, every object was clear and distinct, citadel and domes, watch-towers and portals, all of wondrous lightsomeness and grace: the untarnished silveriness of the building stone in striking contrast with the matchless azure of the sky and gem-like green. There were natural gardens everywhere, flower-beds, bosquets, lawny spaces, town and country so blended that each citizen had forest greenery at his very doors. A stranger thrown suddenly amidst these scenes must have conceived design here—could not have set down the whole as a natural

phenomenon. How exquisite, would be the first thought of such a beholder, to inhabit a place planned, we might fancy, for a race gifted with finer perceptions than our own. Or, to indulge another phantasy, were these crystal domes, lightsome mansions, airy arcades, built by some fellow-mortal, believer in the realization of perfect beauty, high priest of the ideal? No dreams or speculations could seem extravagant or out of keeping.

It was Sunday, but the silence of perpetual Sabbath ever reigned within these precincts. Not a sound broke the eerie stillness: tomb-like desolateness prevailed from end to end.

On this visible fairyland the pair gazed in sullen brooding sadness. André was wishing all the time that these stately piles could be razed to the ground, and in their place rise crops of corn and potatoes. Isabelle sat with fixed, wistful eyes, trying to see nothing.

"André," she said at last, "why do you stay here? Sell your share of the farm to Charles and Jean, and let us go elsewhere."

"The lads are minors as yet, and what would the grandmother and grand-aunt do without me?" André replied, not so much taken aback by the proposition as she expected. "Besides, who would buy a heap of stones like that?"

And he pointed, almost despairingly to the superb spectacle before them.

"I won't say what I may do by-and-by," he went

on. "When my brothers are men, and we have only ourselves to think about, I mean. I am not fonder of this place than you are. But it came to me from my father: I have lived here all my life. If you were only cheerful, I should not envy the President of the Republic himself."

A remorseful expression came into the girl's face as she listened to this speech, not made in anger, but with the quiet pathos of one accustomed to suffer in silence. She averted her head, unable to endure that look of deep, uncomplaining sorrow, and seemed to debate in herself.

"Why do you brood always, and refuse to take pleasure in anything?" the young man went on, determined to take this opportunity of speaking out. "I do not allow anyone to be unkind to you. Our life is no harder than other people's."

"Listen, André," broke in Isabelle, with a look of desperate resolve. "I will tell you the truth; why it is that I would rather be laid in my grave to-morrow than live on here. The place is under a curse."

"So the country folks say. The demon city they have even called these rocks," André replied, ruefully, "and a city they look like. I could swear yonder pile were a ruined watch-tower, such as every town in France can show, and the blocks around, what else do they look like than flat-roofed houses?"

Whilst he glanced curiously around, Isabelle nerved herself to continue.

"The country folks are right. It is an accursed spot, André, and the curse has fallen on me—"

The words were hardly out of her lips, he had not caught their full import, when his quick eye discerned two figures moving in the distance.

"Look straight ahead," he cried; "do you see those specks of red and blue? As I live we have company here to-day. It is some officer with a peasant to show him the way to Millau."

Isabelle's glance followed his own. Yes, the crimson blotch indicated beyond doubt a soldier's uniform, and the bit of blue a goatherd's blouse. The pair were carefully escalading the rocks that might be described as the outworks of the citadel, nearly half a mile off.

To André, the surprise meant but a rare incident; he watched the stranger's movements with curiosity only. Isabelle became greatly agitated. On a sudden, the grassy platform, lodged in mid-air as a balloon, seemed to glide from under her, the glittering panorama swayed beneath her unsteady gaze; for one terrible moment she felt about to be precipitated to the depth below. Deathly pale, trembling in every limb, she clutched at the tufts of wild rosemary within reach, crying faintly for help.

André, who had been watching the strangers on the edge of the rock, was at her side swift as lightning.

"I did not know that you were subject to giddiness," he said, self-reproachfully; "hold fast to me. We will get down at once."

The task was no easy one. Although robust and well-proportioned, he could not be called a rustic athlete, he dare not now shoulder her as many a mountaineer would have done with hardly an effort. How, then, to manage the descent? In bestriding these chasms, a single false step might end in direst injury to both.

No help was within call, not a drop of water within reach. There remained nothing to do but rally her drooping spirits, and brace her for the attempt.

"Come," he said with forced cheerfulness. "Remember that you are the mistress of my house. You must make haste and prepare for those gentlemen yonder, they are sure to stop at the farm and want breakfast."

His words gave Isabelle a certain artificial courage. She sprang to her feet and declared herself ready for the venture.

"Now keep your eyes fixed on the sky, don't look down at all," said the young man. "One foot here, one there; hold my hand tight; that is my brave girl. Why, the worst is half over and you are already looking yourself again."

The momentary vertigo was indeed over. When they reached the first landing-place and paused to take breath, Isabelle's pallor had left her. She peered unshrinkingly into the deep, narrow chasms still to be bridged over.

"You are very good to me, my poor André," she murmured.

"Nonsense," was the almost indifferent reply. Her apathy and coldness had driven all sentiment out of him long ago.

Passionately as he loved her still, there was an aloofness about the feeling that made him appear at times apathetic and cold too. He worshipped the Isabelle who had been his bride, hardly the Isabelle who shared his hearth and home.

Another strained effort or two, the next and less hazardous stages were passed; finally, safe and sound, but flushed and panting, they found themselves again at the starting point—on either side the lavendered waste, high above the sheeny battlements just climbed, before them the labyrinthine streets of the rock-built city.

"You are quite well again? Then I will go and look for the strangers, and do you make haste to the farm. Lay the cloth for breakfast and prepare—well, everything you can think of. These officers have large appetites and are very generous. You will be well rewarded for your pains."

Flushed and eager, with the strangest look in her eyes, Isabelle set off, promising to do her best. André boldly plunged into the stone alleys and arcades, all silent and deserted as a mausoleum.

III.

LIGHTLY as a fawn and wildly exultant, Isabelle sprang over the sweet-scented waste. A brief moment had served to transform her. The look of restlessness,

apathy and dreary introspection passed completely away. Instead, the light of joyfulness indescribable beamed in her eyes, happy looking-forward lent brightness to her cheek, the beautiful lips were parted in a smile, and no subterfuge was necessary on reaching home. The prospect of unexpectedly earning a few francs quite accounted for such changed humour to the grandmother and grand-aunt.

"Shall we help you, child?" they asked, wishing in their hearts that the double windfall would happen every day—Isabelle bustling and happy and extra money earned without trouble.

"I can do things so much best alone, thank you," was the somewhat ungracious but alert reply, as the young housewife set about her preparations. With extraordinary despatch, even in a Frenchwoman, an ample, if homely, breakfast was soon in progress: cabbage and bacon simmered gently in the earthen pot on the blazing wood fire; in another, placed amid the hot ashes, potatoes piled to the brim were being cooked to perfection in their own steam, a spitted fowl sent up savoury vapour, whilst new-laid eggs and freshly gathered chervil were in readiness for the never absent omelette.

Next she very neatly laid the cloth, getting out the finest home-spun table linen, the new cutlery André had won in a raffle at Florac, the little liqueur glasses of rose-coloured crystal with gilt edges, the coffee cups of pure white Limoges, gifts to him on his wedding-

day. Wild flowers are seldom used by French working folks for decorative purposes, or she might have gathered splendid posies by the way. Flower garden there was none, but the beauty-craving Isabelle bethought her of the pomegranate tree, which, with a couple of pink oleanders in tubs, stood on the sunny side of the house, strangely contrasted with their sordid surroundings. Like Isabelle herself, they seemed a dream of beauty amid unsightliness and squalor.

Risking the indignation of the ancient women, she now cut off two or three sprays of the gorgeous blossom, which, in a cheap vase of plain blown glass, wonderfully embellished the table.

Lastly, she made her own toilet.

The grand-dames slept in a small dark room abutting on the kitchen, the lads in a bare attic, whilst the young husband and wife occupied a comparatively comfortable chamber overlooking the farmyard. It had brick floors, and little in the way of furniture but a handsome bedstead, and cloth-press of dark-stained oak. Carpets, curtains, and other luxuries had not as yet been thought of. The large press, however, contained vast quantities of home-spun, home-made linen, besides the Sunday clothes that transformed this Cinderella of the waste into a princess. Whenever she put on one of her best gowns, even the uncouth Jean and Charles were awed into bluntly expressed admiration.

Here she very carefully braided her splendid hair, and brought out a curious gold-green gown, of no ex-

pensive stuff, yet having an absolutely regal look amid such surroundings. With a little sigh of mingled rapture and deprecation, much as if the dress were some evil sprite to be prayed over, some unholy influence to be exorcised, she slipped off her rusty bombazine, and drew around her the dazzling, silky folds. The metamorphosis was startling. Beautiful as she had been in her squalor, she now looked like a queen made ready for splendid pageant. Nothing could have better set off her rich, Southern beauty than these shifting, lizard-like tints of warm green and deep gold, the soft stuff falling gracefully as spun silk. A little necklet of filagree gold, earrings to match, and a white, lace-bordered kerchief completed her toilet; then, the last touch added, she sank into a chair, listening breathlessly.

How the moments dragged! There came no sound to mark the wane of time, no church bell here called the pious to mass, no town clock noted the passing hours. Only the cackling of hens and the quacking of ducks close under her window and the crooning of the grand-dames in the kitchen broke the stillness. The wide waste was silent as the cloudland above, as silent and as unpeopled. Oh, this tomb-like, unearthly silence, thought Isabelle! Were there only street noises and signs of life abroad, she could shake off the spell that bound her, and be careless with the rest. At last she heard quick footsteps and voices outside, and her heart stood still.

They—*he*—had come back!

Swiftly, surprisingly, as in dreams, now passed before her mind's eye the one day of her life that had been life indeed. She saw before her the glorious being whose words had seemed inspiration, whose look had penetrated her very soul, whose presence and way of looking at things transported into a wholly new world. They were again sitting together on the outskirts of the phantom city, that evening wrapped in roseate clouds, and she was listening to his impassioned utterances, the wondrous panorama, the golden cloudlet, even the field flower, lending to his speech the spell of poetry. At first the impersonation of joy, every word, look and gesture expressing intensest enjoyment of life, he had saddened before parting. "And you," he said, gazing on her with deep yet sorrowful admiration, "you are strange and beautiful as your surroundings. Tell me, are you happy?"

That terrible question, asked perhaps lightly, remained unanswered. Was she indeed happy or no? She hardly knew; she had never troubled herself with such an inquiry. Life meant to her daily toil, bread, shelter, matter-of-fact intercourse—no more. But the doubt once awakened could not be set at rest. She turned from him tremblingly; he repeated the words in the softest, tenderest tones, finding her still mute. The speaker drew her towards him, as he might have done a weeping child, and their lips met.

For one brief hour she had felt herself understood. That kiss revealed depths of passion in her own nature,

now for the first time called forth; that intercourse, all too swiftly ended, betrayed yearnings and inspirations that could never be satisfied. The delicious dream had come and gone. Bitterest tears had atoned for the stolen joy. And now the blessing—the curse was within reach again.

These bewildering thoughts passed with lightning-like fleetness through her brain. Her husband's voice dispersed them and the vision of that past day.

"Isabelle, Isabelle," André cried from below. "Quick, I want your help."

The sound of her husband's voice, so kindly, yet associated in her mind with the most ordinary existence only, recalled her to herself. The world of beauty and romance was unattainable as cloudland, common duty and sympathy in material things claimed her.

In a passion of disenchantment and remorse she tore off her dainty, pictorial gown, and donned the thread-bare bombazine. When André, obtaining no answer, ran upstairs, he found her flushed and agitated, but docile.

"The breakfast is to be packed and sent to the rocks, the officer is busy with his sketching," André said, too hurried to notice her excited looks; "and mind, Isabelle, he will sleep here to-night. You and I must give him our room. He dines, too; see that everything is ready."

There was no time for explanation. With trembling fingers Isabelle packed the breakfast, taking care that

everything should look and taste its best: the roast chicken garnished with cresses, the wine cooled in the fountain, the dessert of home-made brioche and macaroons carefully wrapped in writing-paper.

When André had set off with his burden, she began the remaining preparations, hardly giving herself time for breakfast. Thankful that there was so much to do, she did much more than was absolutely necessary.

"All that trouble for an officer!" said the grandmother contemptuously. "Much you will get rewarded for your pains. It is throwing money into the sea to spend so much good soap about this. Were the walls tapestried with cobwebs he would be none the wiser."

"Tush, tush," put in the grand-aunt, with her usual touch of spite. "Have you lived just upon ninety years without knowing that a képi and sword turn every girl's head? If it were a civilian going to lodge here to-night, Isabelle would not move a finger."

Isabelle made no reply to these taunts, she did not even toss her head scornfully, as was her wont. Without a word she carried broom, pail and scrubbing-brushes upstairs, and the pair saw no more of her for hours.

IV.

TWILIGHT gradually stole over the waste, lending its accustomed mysteriousness and witchery. Nothing could be more romantically, ethereally beautiful than the quiet tones and subdued harmonies of the scene now. A soft

yet lustrous silveriness wrapped the lower stage, farm buildings, rock-strewed wilderness and Eldritch City, whilst far above and around, the deep violet outline of Causses and mountain rested against a greyish-blue heaven.

But if such the glamour cast by closing day about the landscape generally, what was the aspect of the city itself? that majestic capital, so real, so phantom-like, raised, one felt ready to swear it, by human agency, nevertheless untenanted as Persepolis or Palmyra.

The effect of twilight was here magical, the masses of grey stone gleaming like alabaster in the opaline light, the symmetrical outlines taking wonderful grace and lightness. No place for evil spirits, dread afrits, shapeless gnomes, seemed this; rather the haunt of gracious and beneficent geniuses, ministrants of peace and beauty to man.

Into this weird yet lovely scene stole Isabelle, and no figure could be more in keeping with it. She had exchanged her bombazine for a neat cotton gown, very light in colour, which looked like ghostly drapery as she hastened across the waste. André was feeding his stock. Jean and Charles were not yet home from the fair, the grand-dames watched the numerous earthern pots bubbling amid the ashes; it was surely her place to summon their guest to dinner.

She knew exactly where to find him. He was anxious to avail himself of every ray of light, finishing a sketch, André said, just outside the city. Strange

that he should have chosen the self-same spot in which they had sat last year. Surely he expected her! There could be no harm in a hand-clasp, a whispered conference ere they parted for the second time, most likely for ever. She would pour out her loneliness, her yearning and her repentance. He would listen and console, perhaps press her lips to his own as before. Life would be easier after such an interview. Having sipped of the very essence of happiness, she felt as if she should thirst no more.

With flushed cheek, quickly-drawn breath and beating heart, she hastened towards the solitary figure amid the rocks. As she drew nearer and nearer, all doubts and misgivings were set at rest. Yes, she could not be mistaken. The dress, the slight, athletic form, the turn of the head, the very pose were his; just so had he rested his arms on his sketch-book, with upraised face drinking in the deliciousness of the hour.

To the astonished sketcher such an apparition seemed in keeping with the rest. A wraith could hardly have come as a surprise in such a place. When he caught sight of this slender, beautiful girl stealing towards him, as if sure of a welcome, he felt in the humour for mystery, ready to accept unrealities and believe in phenomena the most startling. There was little of the phantom about Isabelle, except her white dress and stealthy, gliding movements; still less did she recall the peasant maiden, daughter or wife of herdsman. It seemed impossible to imagine this glorious creature

living amid such surroundings, no hardier, homelier life to be found throughout France.

Meantime the twilight gloom gathered fast. When the pair approached each other there was hardly light enough to discern features, had they been bent on such scrutiny. Without a second thought, only delighting, as any young, adventuresome, beauty-loving man might do in the romantic situation, he now sprang to his feet, and caught her outstretched hand. But Isabelle, overcome with joy and timidity, averted her face and burst into tears.

"You are unhappy. Make a friend of me. Let me help and comfort you," he said, leading her to a mossy seat, supporting her, as she sat, still weeping, with her face buried in her hands.

"You will go to-morrow. My duties are here. We shall never meet again," she murmured. "But a word of sympathy, of kindness from those who understand us, how good it is; and your voice is not like the voices I hear every day. Its tones, so soft, so tender, have haunted me since first we met—"

"Have we then met before?" asked the young man kindly.

That question, neither coldly nor indifferently, but put in a tone of surprise, stopped Isabelle's tears. She grew calm in a moment, chilled by his apparent forgetfulness, deeply wounded by what seemed to her want of heart.

"You were right to forget our meeting. I will forget

too," was the proud reply. Then, once more overcome by the passionate longing of the moment before, and anxious to know something more of an existence which in one sense, was linked with her own, she went on.

"Tell me of yourself. There can be no harm in that. Are you happy—are you beloved? I am only a poor peasant's wife: my business is to cook, darn and spin. But you are gifted, beautiful, favoured by fortune. Your lot should be brilliant. Many and many a time I have wished myself dead. Were I dying to-morrow, the thought that Râoul were well and joyous would bring me peace."

The Captain started. That mention of his dead friend straightway unravelled the whole mystery. Here, then, was a clue to Râoul Rivière's silence about the Eldritch City, the holding back of those wonderful sketches. A French officer of the better class, handsome, fascinating, warm-hearted, how can he choose but make love, be made love to, wherever he goes; leave behind him fond memories in many a girl's heart?

Everything became plain to him now. Râoul had, of course, visited the place; undoubtedly the first soldier artist who had found his way to such a world's end. Between him and the pathetic-voiced, superb-eyed maiden at his side, had taken place an interchange of confidences, maybe of lovers' vows; he, alas! to cross the sea and be stricken down, she to remain behind, yearning for him, expecting him, after the woman's way. That she should imagine himself to be Râoul was

natural enough, seeing that strangers rarely, if ever, penetrated these mountain fastnesses.

"You are in error, my poor girl," he began, much moved. "That name on your lips just now belongs not to me but another—"

Isabelle drew back speechless with astonishment and mortification; then, a little recovering herself, she murmured:

"Forget what I have said; or if you meet him again, bear a message for me. Say—"

"No messages can reach him more," the Captain said very sorrowfully. "The Râoul you remember, so brilliant, so beloved, is dead. His grave is made in far-off Algérie, on the borders of the great desert."

"Dead!" cried Isabelle, sinking to the stony seat just quitted. "Râoul is dead?"

How the word changed everything to her, alike the world without and within—life in its outer aspects and the life of feeling and thought! A moment before, she had been possessed by a woman's clinging passion, her little sphere made up of beauteous dreams, spoiling her for the existence of every-day. Now, the prosaic past seemed to shrink into nothingness; she felt dwarfed, bruised and abashed as she contemplated it. Who was she to aspire to flawless happiness and what she regarded as the fulfilment of her destiny, when Râoul's portion was to be cut off in the flower of his youth, his bright promise unrealized, his splendid powers undeveloped? He was dead, the darkness of the tomb

wrapped him round, but she lived on, henceforth a perpetual rebuke to herself. In her desolation, she felt, to use the poet's words, that the grave holds all things beautiful and good. The beautiful twilight earth, with its fragrance and starry dome, seemed to have no meaning. Râoul was dead, the gay, the gifted, the generous. Not for him these flowery wastes, the glorious sky, the strange city rocks; not for him love and sympathy.

"I have wept too. I loved him as a brother," the Captain said with blunt kindness. "But tears cannot bring him back again. Had we not better make our way to the farm?"

EPILOGUE.

But Râoul's voice reached Isabelle from the very tomb. The little episode, so bitterly repented of, confided to the faithful André with tears of shame, was destined to change the course of their existence. As if even unwise impulses of a generous, upright nature may work blessing, the confession of the stolen interview and its consequences brought about a perfect understanding between husband and wife, whilst the discovery of the young military engineer resulted in a wondrous change of fortune to both.

For discovery it must be called; the Eldritch City apparently fashioned with skill and cunning, but the handiwork of nature only, had hitherto escaped the ob-

servation of topographers and geologists. Râoul's pencil had been the first to delineate it; the Captain having, to his great joy, identified the place, noised its fame abroad. Deputations of learned societies published reports, guide-books furnished descriptions, photographers and artists found their way to the marvellous site, the curious followed. Soon the rambling, ill-kept old farm-house was replaced by a cheerful, commodious inn. Isabelle, now neat and zealous, bustled about, no longer finding time for wayward repinings. André and his brothers, leaving farm work to others, acted as guides. Money flowed in rapidly. From May to October the place was alive with strangers, whilst the winter was spent in preparing for their arrival.

Not only André and his family were benefited by the change, the outlying districts being enriched by the yearly influx of strangers. The hitherto accursed city became a Providence to all.

And meantime, the poet's fate:—Râoul Rivière, who, in a certain sense, was the creator of the place, slept in his neglected grave on the borders of the desert. The marvel and beauty he had made visible to other eyes, as with a wand, were shut from his own for ever.

FATHER CHRYSTAL'S ELIXIR.

FATHER CHRYSTAL'S ELIXIR.

"Do not suppose for a moment that the life of a monk in these days is one whit duller than it used to be. Comedy, ay, and for the manner of that, tragedy also, diversifies our daily routine, as was the case when monasteries would be turned into camps, and Abbots into generalissimos. No more now, than then, have monks ceased to be human beings. Active brains are still at work in spite of the tonsured crown, and the spirit of mischief is alert within the monastery walls as in the olden time."

Thus spoke my agreeable friend, Father Bartolomaus, Capucin friar, quartered in the French town at which I was staying. We had become acquainted during one of my sketching rambles near his monastery, and soon became the best comrades imaginable. A man of the world, an agreeable talker, keenly observant, and warm-hearted withal, his society was the greatest possible boon to me on my sketching tour.

With him it was out of the question to feel dull for a moment. As for himself, he was always in the highest spirits, and no wonder! Such dire problems as making

a fair income out of one's brains, paying rent and taxes, bringing up a young family, starting one's boys in life, finding suitable partners for one's daughters, and all the rest of it, would never whiten his hair or furrow his brow prematurely. Perpetual immunity from everyday anxieties, an existence as easy as that of a blackbird in a well-filled garden, were surely worth the puny sacrifice made in exchange. To forswear domestic happiness, to cut an outlandish figure in the eyes of the world, to feel born at the wrong epoch in human history, what mere bagatelles were these! Anyhow Father Bartolomaus looked and acknowledged himself the happiest fellow under the sun.

"Comedy, to begin with. We will leave tragedy for to-morrow," he went on. "Let me relate a comic incident that happened only a few years ago, and for the truth of which I can vouch. You will then see that if we monks weep more freely than you laymen over mortal weaknesses, at least we can laugh with the merriest of you when moved by wit or folly.

"I am now going to tell you a story of the jolliest company that ever alternated good cheer with fasting and rollicking talk with good midnight vigils. Not a mother's son of this brotherhood but was born a wag, and might have got his living by his wits in the Middle Ages as a King's jester or Court fool; or in these as a comic actor. Perhaps a few years of buffeting with the world might have sobered them; but, as it was, their good-humour and pleasantry received no check from

the first of January to the last day of December. True it is that occasionally high spirits overstepped the bounds of discretion, and fun was apt to become too ebullient for decorum. However, derelictions which are only amenable to such slight punishments as the mumbling of a few extra Paternosters and fasts so-called, are not very dreadful affairs, and indeed, only served to add zest to the daily routine. But for such occasional fillips, existence might have appeared a little flat and insipid. Like certain luscious wines, it would have palled upon the appetite. But when was the tide of human affairs ever permitted an unbrokenly calm and even flow? On a sudden this smooth condition of things was brought to an abrupt end. Like a bomb-shell in the midst of the happy fraternity came a piece of evil news.

"Their Superior, a genial, amiable man of the world, a man who loved, if not jollity and carouse, at least comfort and good-fellowship, was transferred to another house. In his place was sent a taciturn, sour, ascetic theologian, who evidently held, like the hermits of old, that the only justifiable existence is one of self-mortification and voluntarily incurred depression of body and mind.

"What were the poor brothers to do?

"Open rebellion against legitimately imposed authority was not for a moment to be thought of. No justly founded complaint could they raise. The new Superior did not in any particular exceed his powers, or show

himself tyrannical. But he was of a morose disposition —there you have the truth in a nutshell!—and nowhere is a morose disposition more out of place than in a monastery.

"Cheerful looks, sprightly speech, to say nothing of wit and pleasantry, seemed a positive affront to this misguided, but doubtless well-intentioned, man. He was probably a martyr to dyspepsia, or perhaps—let me whisper this in your ear—a prey to secret remorse, some saint recently whitewashed from mortal peccadilloes. A jest was odious to him. A smile he turned away from as if it were loathsome. In fact, do what they would, the unfortunate monks found it impossible in his presence to be grave enough; and, although, fortunately for them, they spent a good deal of time out of his sight, they were yet at their wits' end how to arrive at the necessary staidness of demeanour. Especially on days of Church festival, or ceremonials of their own calendar, was the task grievous and painful in the extreme. Upon these occasions the board would be spread more plentifully than usual, generous wines, and even liqueurs, would be handed round, and the pleasures of the table were apt to be long drawn out.

"If then hard for a company of jovial fellows to behave like mutes at a funeral, when faring on potato soup, and haricot beans, washed down with water from the fountain, was it not outrageous, even irrational, to expect them to be downcast and monosyllabic when bidden to a sumptuous banquet?

"The Superior might frown and look glumness itself, as he tossed off his final glass of ripe old Burgundy or sparkling champagne. The brothers made piteous attempts to put on a rueful countenance, and restrain the too-ready tongue. All in vain. Eyes sparkled, lips curled upwards, cheeks glowed, as one good story after another elicited roars of laughter. The Superior at last could bear it no longer. Calling the elders of the fraternity before him, he remonstrated briefly and tartly.

"'Really, well really, such a state of things was passing belief. High spirits and uproarious mirth were pardonable among a set of schoolboys on the eve of breaking up, but the case of men avowed to a religious vocation was quite different. Really—ahem—in fact, the long and the short of the matter is, that unless a decorous sobriety of demeanour be at once striven after and attained, all celebrations that have hitherto taken the shape of a festival must be stopped, and fasts, even sterner mortifications of the flesh, be substituted for such indulgences as the canons of their Order not only sanctioned, but encouraged.'

"The crestfallen delegates were then dismissed, and the monks took counsel together. For the moment they looked miserable enough. The Superior must have been more than satisfied with such a demeanour, could it be looked upon as lasting. Not much seemed forthcoming in the way of comfort or advice, till, when each member of the conclave had said his say, the

youngest of them all, Father Chrystal by name, opened his lips.

"This Father Chrystal was quite a genius, in no common way either. He was not only a good botanist, but a skilful herbalist and simpler, cognizant with the medicinal properties and virtues generally of a vast number of plants. Whenever any one fell ill inside the monastery walls, or met with an accident, Father Chrystal was the physician sent for. His balms, syrups, decoctions, and miscellaneous remedies brought in quite a little revenue to the house, being known throughout that quarter of France.

"Father Chrystal, with twinkling eyes and countenance unabashed, now unfolded his plan. He had long been in the possession, he said, of an interesting, a most valuable secret, a secret that, were he a civilian and able to indulge in commercial speculation, would certainly make his fortune. More than one unworked mine of gold, indeed, was his. There was not a monk or lay-brother in the house who had not told him that a dozen times. His eyewater, for instance! Patented and sold as a medicine, such a remedy must bring in a handsome income. Then his cure for scalds, burns, and bruises—but, pshaw! these were mere bagatelles, trifles not worth thinking about, at least, talking about just then! A matter much more important had come to the fore.

"Then Father Chrystal began to quote Greek, for, as well as being a first-rate naturalist, he was a fair

scholar. They must all have read, he continued, of the wonderful nostrums of the ancients, love-philtres, aphrodisiacs, as the classic writers called them, and so forth. But he had struck out a wholly new line for himself. He had invented an elixir, such as the world had never yet heard of, and which, yet in so complex a civilization as that of the nineteenth century, must have extraordinary value. They were all familiar with the wine that maketh glad the heart of man. But would not the wine that sobered men's spirits have its use also?

"'At any rate, it nicely meets our own case,' he said. 'This day se'nnight is the festival of our patron saint. It will be my turn to act as steward upon that occasion. Mind and drink everything I offer you. A light effervescing wine I shall hand round pretty freely is the draught especially to be indulged in. Whilst tickling the palate and refreshing the body, its effect on the mind is curious and palpable. The first portion imbibed diffuses pensive gravity; empty your glass, and the muscles of the face take a downward curve; drink deep, and you become apparently a prey to intense dejection and melancholy.'

"The monks harkened, all attention, and one and all, with the utmost alacrity, promised to obey. True, their ardour concerning Father Chrystal's elixir was somewhat damped by the fact that it induced mental depression. That was surely uncomfortable enough of

itself; nevertheless the solution of a knotty problem was caught at. What harm, moreover, would a temporary fit of low spirits do them? They would, at least, be spared those far more unpleasant alternatives hinted at by the Superior—rigorous abstention from wine, an increase of fast days, and perhaps—who could say?—penances savouring of mediæval harshness. A scourge still formed part of the furniture of every cell, and though it was no more used than the ancestral sword hanging over the mantelpiece of an English mansion, well, there it was!

"The important day came duly round, and the presence of visitors, dignitaries from distant houses, lent additional pomp to the celebration.

"It was indeed an inviting, an appetizing board that was spread in the long refectorium that day. Trout, fresh from the river; melons in the perfection of ripeness; venison from the adjoining forest; pasties for which that especial region of France was famous; cheese creamiest of the creamy; luscious grapes; in fact, the banquet was princely, aldermanic. On the sideboard a goodly array of bottles promised equal delectation in the way of wines and liqueurs. Well might the Superior, as he passed down the refectory with his guests, cast a satisfied glance to the right, to the left, and before him; everywhere he saw signs of a feast befitting one of the cheeriest, most hospitable Orders that ever wore the cowl. This religious man, it must be admitted, although his

gravity in no wise abated whilst he sat at table, was an excellent trencher man. Doubtless his appetites were so purged by fasting and prayer that no kind of enjoyment was derived from delicate cakes or exquisite draughts, nevertheless he could eat and drink with the merriest gourmet going.

"Grace having been chanted, the meal began, Father Chrystal having the wine-bottles and the lay-brothers in attendance well in hand. It was his business to-day to give out the contents of the cellar and superintend the procedure of the feast generally, so, whilst contriving to keep up with the rest, he yet rose from time to time to see that his instructions were properly carried out, and even took part in the business of serving.

"Rich in expedients and full of devices, the miracle-working distiller had now a twofold object to attain. He must not only take good care that not a drop of any strong drink, save his own elixir, should moisten the throats of his fellow friars, equally important was it that the Superior and his guests should be plied from other sources. Thus, by an ingenious sleight of hand, he managed to exchange precisely similar bottles on the sideboard, pouring into the glasses of the monks his *Elixir de Douleur*, as he pleasantly styled it, into that of their stern monitor and his friends a beverage of directly opposite properties.

"The result was what had been foretold. In grave

and decorous silence the twenty and odd Capucin friars sat down to table, and the Superior almost smiled to see—yes, his rebuke had not been made in vain; no roysterous conversation, no unseemly jests were to shock his sense of propriety and disgrace the Order to which he belonged that day. All was as it should be—demure, decorous, and sobriety itself.

"No sooner, however, did Father Chrystal's elixir begin to circulate freely than gravity was succeeded by pensiveness, pensiveness by gloom, gloom by absolute, dire, lachrymose dejection. One by one the poor monks looked the veriest images of woe; they ate, they drank, it is true, but an outsider might have supposed they were all going to be hanged next day.

"And still the Superior almost smiled to see. It was a very difficult thing to make this man unbend; even under the influence of sparkling, joy-giving champagne, he could maintain the grave demeanour of a judge. Still to-day the duties of a host necessitated exertion and sacrifice on his part; he must at least make a show of urbanity. He was flattered, moreover, that his subjects, as in a certain sense these friars were, should be so amenable to reason and remonstrance. Thus, although no mood could be farther from hilarity than his own, he looked positively exhilarated by comparison with the brothers. As to his guests, they had been informed beforehand of recent occurrences, and

took this openly displayed penitence on the part of the offenders as a matter of course.

"All this time, of course, Father Chrystal abstained alike from his own elixir and the mellow cup beside it, pride of the monastery cellar. He must be master of himself to the end, or all would be ruined. So he plied now the one bottle, now the other, delighted with the success of his little scheme. There they sat, his once jovial comrades, as he had predicted, silent as mutes at a funeral; if they interchanged a word, it was in monosyllables. They looked neither to the right nor to the left, and ate of the dainty cates placed before them automatically, without relish, apparently without appetite, and when the crowning feature of the entertainment appeared in the shape of a *chef-d'œuvre* of the confectioner's skill, the signal on former occasions of a round of applause, one brother, hitherto the jolliest of the crew, drew out his pocket-handkerchief.

"That pocket-handkerchief brought matters to a climax. No sooner was one brother seen wiping away his tears, than another and another felt an imperative call to weep. Grief is even more contagious than joy. At what should have been the merriest part of the banquet, the monks, one and all, sat sobbing over the delicious morsel served out to them, which they nevertheless contrived to eat all the while. Then at last and indeed, a smile, real, visible, and unmistakable, was visible on the face of the ascetic Superior. The whole

scene was so incongruous, so ludicrous, so unexpected, that had he not smiled, he must have been more than human. As to his guests they feigned a tickling in the throat and tittered behind their handkerchiefs, whilst the poor lay brethren in attendance, overcome with merriment, hurried pell-mell into the buttery in order to avoid a scandal.

"The only person present who was exactly himself, neither one whit merrier nor sadder, was Father Chrystal. A proud and happy man he felt that moment, and well he might. He had vindicated the honour of his Order, he had foiled the intentions of a crusty Superior, he had proved himself as good as his word. As the party broke up—the monks, with tears running down their cheeks, filing off in one direction; the Superior and his guests, now laughing audibly as they passed through the opposite door; the lay brethren, bursting with fun as they peered from the pantry; Father Chrystal surveyed the scene, triumphant. He stood like some successful stage-manager, contemplating the triumph of his own bringing about, no empty vaunter, no vain trumpeter of his own achievements. His *Elixir de Douleur* was, past question, one of the great inventions of the world."

"And what became of it?" I asked of the narrator.

"It has made the fortune, not of Father Chrystal, but of his house," added Father Bartolomaus. "How

could it be otherwise with such a brew? Its vast applicability must at once occur to you. For instance, it is not vouchsafed to all of us to leave behind a host of heart-broken relations. How appropriate, how decorous, Father Chrystal's elixir at certain funeral feasts, when a semblance of grief is obligatory! Again, in public life, it comes in with great handiness and decency. It will often happen that an unpopular functionary is fêted before his departure, and upon such occasions civilians have recourse to this wine in order to squeeze out a tear or two, or when an obnoxious Superior is about to be removed, we monks drink to him in cups that make us seem to lament rather than unseasonably rejoice. As to actors on the stage, it is invaluable to them. By the help of Father Chrystal's elixir they can weep and show extreme dejection in the most natural manner and without the least effort. The clergy of all churches have recourse to it largely, and judges—at least in France—never go on a circuit without it. As to women! Well, you will say I ought to know nothing about *them*. I may, however, at least tell you what others tell me. They say, then, that lovers are constantly winning over obdurate mistresses to listen to their suit by help of this precious nostrum. They just imbibe a little, and their sighs, tears, and melancholy are more than the hearts of the tender sex can resist. Not a daughter of Eve but yields to it. Suppose you make the experiment?"

"You forget," I said, "that I am already a pater-familias with a host of youngsters all depending on my palette and brush. Fits of dejection come, alas! to me often enough, without needing to resort to artificial means! However, when I am next woe-begone and depressed, I shall think of your story, and I must be very far gone indeed if it does not provoke a smile."

THE HALT ON THE WAY.

THE HALT ON THE WAY.

It was a wild January night even in sunny Algeria. The city itself was deluged with blinding rain; over the vast plain of the Metidja blew a hurricane, whilst through the famous forest of Teniet-el-Haad raged the storm-wrack, weighing down the veteran cedars with masses of snow. Such storms overtake the traveller here without warning, and twenty years ago few and wide apart, the caravanserais offering shelter on the road.

About half-way between Algiers and the little garrison of Teniet-el-Haad, stood one of these rough hostelries, affording the scantiest possible accommodation, yet with its feebly twinkling lights and barking of dogs innumerable how welcome to the belated wanderer on such a night! Few however—all the better luck for them!—seemed to be abroad.

When evening closed in, only three tourists occupied the part of the building reserved for the better order of visitors. This was a spacious oblong room used as a *salle-à-manger*, and leading out of it were four small bed-chambers generally reserved for ladies. A huge

fire of cedar logs blazed at one end, and set round were large sofas, made up as beds in case of necessity. To-night, however, the three strangers, an English lady, her young daughter, and a woman courier, had the whole place to themselves. The lady and her maid were now busy unpacking in their rooms; and the girl —one of those fair, delicate little maidens typical of England and English bringing up—sat alone on a low stool by the fire.

She held an open book in her hands, a story of Miss Yonge's, but the sense of being in a caravanserai was too novel and too exciting to permit of reading. As she watched the cedar logs, wondering what would be the next experience of this wonderful African journey, the large door leading into the outer building opened and a lady wearing a riding-habit entered. The girl sprang up at once, and not abashed by the circumstance that the newcomer was a Frenchwoman, offered her place and her friendly offices. The weary, bedraggled appearance of the stranger moved the gentle-hearted child to compassion, whilst her beauty impressed her still more. For the dripping veil and soddened hat being now removed, she saw before her one of the most beautiful faces she had as yet beheld. It was not the face of a very young woman, certainly not that of a very happy one. But the perfection of lines, the pearliness, almost radiance of the pale complexion, the dark, unutterably expressive eyes, the shadowy hair piled up in a coronet over the brow—all these made a picture

to be gazed upon again and again, and once seen, if only glanced at, not to be easily forgotten.

"Will you not take off your riding-habit?" asked Eva Langford, touching one damp sleeve with dismay.

The stranger shook her head.

"My trunk is forwarded to Teniet by *diligence*, dear child. But I wore a mackintosh over this. I am not really wet, only cold, so cold."

So saying, she stretched her slender feet and small white hands towards the fire.

Eva, childlike and impetuous always, was on her knees in a moment, unlacing the stranger's shoes. The lady remonstrated with a sweet pensive smile, but Eva would have her way.

"I always do it for mamma," she said, delighted to be busy and to make so fascinating an acquaintance. She was noting all the while too, with a child's ingenuous curiosity, the exact fit and elaborate finish of the shoes, the fineness of the silk stockings the marvellous symmetry of the small feet. Everything about the stranger seemed phenomenal to her inexperienced eyes.

"And if you would really like to get rid of your riding-habit, I am sure mamma would lend you a dress," she prattled on. "She has two in her portmanteau, I know."

For answer, the lady stooped down and pressed a kiss on the upraised forehead.

"Darling, I should like to accept the offer, if only to

give you pleasure. But I have been riding all day long, and have another long journey in store for me to-morrow. I must get some food, then go straight to bed. Strange!" she added, still bending low over the sweet young face. "You remind me of an English girl I loved dearly years ago."

The cedar logs now blazed anew and lighted up the pair, making a marvellously beautiful picture. The perfect, pensive face of the elder woman with its marble-like yet healthful paleness, wealth of dusky hair and strange expression, half of wild unrest, half of despairing resolve, formed a striking contrast to the innocent, untroubled, questioning look of the kneeling girl. The one might have symbolized Night, the other Morning, so dark, mysterious, at the same time starry and beautiful, the stranger; so golden, rosy, hopeful, the apparition of the English Eva.

"Just such blue eyes, and fair wavy hair, just such a bloom had she on her cheeks," mused the Frenchwoman, whose name was Madame d'Arlay, stroking the dainty, upturned head. Then, as if speaking to herself, she added, "My Eva, ah! where are you now?"

"That is my name, too!" Eva said, child as she was, inexperienced as she was, able to realize the pathos of the clear voice, the witchery of the dark, penetrating eyes. She did not know how it was, but this lonely, beautiful woman seemed to lift her out of the every-day world into the region of romance. As she now knelt at her feet, chafing her small cold hands on which sparkled

costly rings, a feeling akin to adoration came over her. She dared not give utterance to the thought, uppermost in her mind, but the other read it as an open book. With smiling yet pensive approval, once more the grand, gracious creature leaned forward and touched the child's innocent forehead with her lips.

At that moment the door of one of the inner chambers opened, and a veritable copy of Eva's self appeared on the threshold. But a richer, fuller copy; this young English matron, with her insular freshness and bloom, was just as sweet to look on as her youthful daughter, though in her case the naïveté and shy inquiringness of girlhood were exchanged for the placid repose of the wife and mother. Otherwise, indeed, the pair might have been taken for elder and younger sister of a large family.

Swift as lightning, however, a look of recognition flashed across Mrs. Langford's face, and with it disappeared every trace of the quiet unconcern and tranquillity that had reigned there the moment before. Turning from deep crimson to ashen pale, trembling in every limb, she sprang forward, and swiftly, almost roughly, raised the astounded Eva from her low seat at the stranger's knees. Then, far too agitated to murmur so much as a word of explanation or reproof, she hurried her to the room she had herself just quitted, and by a sign of her pale lips only, bade her stay there.

"Mamma, mamma dear," cried the disconcerted girl, "what have I done? Why may I not speak to that lady?"

Still Mrs. Langford could not get out a syllable. She merely dropped a hasty kiss on the troubled, appealing young face held up to her own, then, shutting the door after her, she returned to the large bare salon, where the stranger now sat alone.

II.

SHE too had recognized in Eva's mother the schoolfellow and bosom-friend of innocent girlish days, and to her, also, recognition brought keenest anguish. When Mrs. Langford returned, she found the slender, black-robed figure huddled before the fire like some shame-stricken, woe-begone, self-abandoned thing. Even the quickly shut door, and hasty advancing step of the Englishwoman, did not rouse her; or was it that she could not bear to meet the eyes of her childhood's friend? Without a moment's hesitation, with that direct, abrupt, merciless candour which takes no account of personal feeling, and is only bent on reaching the truth, the other plunged at once into the matter nearest her heart.

"Jeanne!" she cried, "it is my child you have been caressing—you, the run-away wife, the unnatural mother, —you must have divined it. How dared you do it?"

The pale face was now raised proudly, and the tall, beautifully formed figure resumed its former erect attitude.

"How was I to tell?" she asked, in a pained apologetic voice, yet with the tone of one bound to make a

feeble effort on her own behalf. "Nor could she know anything of my history, either. What harm should I do her?"

Mrs. Langford dropped into the vacant chair on the opposite side of the fireplace, with a look of desperate resolve. Cost what it might, she was determined to unburden herself. Her whole frame was shaken with passionate indignation. She knew that she was not mistress of herself, that she might give utterance to ungenerous, cruel, even unjustifiable sentiments. Nevertheless, she must speak.

"Harm!" she reiterated, with extraordinary bitterness. "Is there no harm in appearing what you are not? You were speaking tenderly to my Evey just now, kissing her innocent brow, as a mother might—you who have abandoned your own little girls, left them to hirelings and strangers, and for what? To follow your own wild will, to enslave yourself to a shameless lover!"

Harder-hitting words could scarcely be uttered; and the other, in spite of her calm and evidently deliberate reserve, writhed under them. She sat erect, looking straight into her old schoolfellow's face.

"Do not arraign one who is not here to defend himself," she said, in quiet, passive tones. "I, too, could say something by way of self-defence if you would listen to me."

"I know well enough what arguments you have to use," retorted Mrs. Langford, shocked at her own

vehemence, yet unable to restrain it; unable to see, moreover, any just cause for restraining it. She had still before her mind's eye the vivid picture of a few minutes ago, her own Evey, her tenderly reared darling, in the arms of a fallen angel, a woman unworthy of woman friends. "You would lay all the blame of your conduct upon an unsuitable marriage, a *mariage de convenance*, forced upon you by your parents. Unhappy I know you were from the beginning of your wedded life; but you have children. Could not these teach you patience?"

She was growing a little calmer now—the force of indignation was gradually spending itself as she went on, getting nearer and nearer to the sense of personality, lost sight of just before. This Jeanne was still the Jeanne she loved in early days. During many years their correspondence had formed the closest confidence of their maiden lives. Affection began not to re-assert itself, but to be remembered.

"Is entire happiness in marriage the portion of us all, if any? Must we look for that faultlessness in our husbands we do not ourselves possess? I married as an English girl naturally does—the man of her choice. Can I aver, for all that, that the path of life has never been thorny and difficult? We must bear and forbear in marriage as in every other condition of life. And, again, you were not childless.

"Children are not always clinging and affectionate,

and they may be taught to turn even against their own mother," said Madame d'Arlay.

"Is that a reason for abandoning them?" asked Eva. "If your own children do not love you, the fault must be your own. People are always too ready to love you —the worse for them."

Every phase of this interview was bringing back to both something of the old relationship. Mrs. Langford did not know if she had touched her former friend at all. She only realized that the old feelings could not be got rid of—that, in spite of the apparent gulf dividing them, the past with its clinging memories of girlhood would never be undone, or even lost to sight.

Madame d'Arlay, on her side, was wondering how much of the warm-hearted, confiding Eva of former days remained; how much, if at all, she might count on her sympathy.

"Others may be ready to love me—yes," she now said, in a voice as clear, animated and outspoken as that of her companion, and, if possible, more bitter. "But can we force our affections against our will? I will conceal nothing. This man for whom I am sacrificing so much is the only being in the world I have ever loved."

"And do we live to love and be loved only?" cried Mrs. Langford, scornful and biting. "Does not duty count for something in life? Is that love worth acceptance which is purchased at the price of conscience?"

Jeanne sat with bowed head, and hands clasped on her knees.

"You cannot understand me. You love your husband, he has ever been good to you," she murmured in a low voice.

"Were it otherwise—for my Evey's sake . . . But do not let us talk of myself," Mrs. Langford said, extremely agitated, her utterance for a moment checked by burning tears. "I have brought my darling here for her health: her father awaits us at home. My life and duty lie straight before me. But your ways—your ways are crooked, Jeanne. They make me tremble. Why are you here and alone to-day?"

"I have nothing more to disclose," was the proud, passionate answer. "That love I spoke of just now is my only refuge. I am seeking it as a shelter, a home."

"He is here, then—in Algeria—the false friend, the tempter, the spoiler of your peace?" asked Eva.

"I join him to-morrow at Teniet-el-Haad. There, hidden from the world, we shall live for each other," was the low-voiced reply.

"Jeanne, do not so delude yourself," continued Mrs. Langford, putting all the force and passion she was mistress of into her words; "I am a wife as well as you. I also have some experience of the world and of human hearts. Never believe that such a union can bring anything but fleeting joy with it. Better, ay, thrice more endurable the fate of a neglected, unloved—

Heaven help me!—an injured wife, than the silent scorn of unhallowed love; sooner or later it will crush you. Jeanne, you are a woman; be proud for the sake of others. For," she added, now kneeling on the low stool lately occupied by her young daughter, "you do not know what harm you do us all by consenting thus to abase, humiliate yourself—you who are so beautiful, who might be so good! My Eva just now, my own innocent child,—I saw it at a glance—she was fascinated by your beauty, your winningness; and when she comes to learn, as learn she shall some day, that you are not fit to be caressed and loved by pure souls like her own, what a bitter experience and disenchantment for her! And she is only one out of many. Think of your own children, girls too, in their turns to become wives and mothers. When they are old enough to understand it, think you that your story will be concealed from them! If they in their turn should go astray, the sin will be yours. It must be so. Oh! these curses will madden you at last, when it is too late."

The clear, passionate voice broke down; the usually calm, perhaps to outsiders commonplace, young mother lay at the feet of her friend weeping bitterly, utterly unable to control herself, incapable of getting out another syllable. Jeanne also was much moved, though evidently unshaken in her resolve. Large tears streamed down her pale cheeks; and feeling that since she could not say the word Eva listened for, there was no need to speak at all, forgetting for a moment their relations

towards each other, she now bent down and stroked the mother's golden hair, as half an hour before she had stroked the child's.

That touch recalled Mrs. Langford to herself, she started up and, realizing that her appeal was in vain, as if a venomous serpent had stung her, fled to her room, never once looking back.

III.

NEXT morning every trace of the storm had vanished. Only the rain-drops sparkled like copious dew on the flowery waste, and as the sun rose in golden and crimson splendour, myriads of wild flowers opened their leaves, literally carpeting the turf. The vast rich plain, with its gleaming white towns and villages, lay bathed in sunshine, whilst far away, delicately pencilled in azure and violet, stretched the Atlas Mountains.

The little household of the caravanserai was astir betimes. Soon after daybreak one or two travellers took their leave, and grooms were busy with the horses of the ladies. It was evident that alike the solitary horsewoman and the English trio contemplated immediate departure. Having hastily swallowed some coffee in her own room, Jeanne traversed the large quadrangle, charging her Arab attendant to follow with the horses as soon as he was ready. Then she passed out of the gateway into the road. A little beyond was a bit of rising ground, and thither she directed her steps, intending to wait till the horses should follow.

It was so near the road that she could see if any one left the building, yet not so near that she need necessarily be observed. Here she sat down listlessly, not noting the superb oleanders bordering a stream below, nor heeding the matchlessly graceful asphodels shooting like silver arrows towards the warm blue sky.

Sad and listless, yet with the same expression of fixed determination, she waited, now mechanically plucking a handful of thyme or reseda, now tapping her riding-whip impatiently against the stony ledge on which she sat. The beauty of the place and of the hour, with its virginal freshness and transparency, its rosy smilingness and serenity, disconcerted her. She would have preferred to continue her desperate journey in storm and rain.

As she sat thus, owning to herself that, in spite of the love for which she was sacrificing her peace, no forlorner creature breathed in the wide world, she felt her waist suddenly clasped by little hands, and saw a sweet girlish face bent low over her own. It was Evey Langford, though if any human being could look like an apparition rather than a mortal creature, it was this artless, clinging girl now!

She had taken off her hat, slinging it over one arm, whilst on her bosom and in her hair were beautiful field-flowers, hastily appropriated on the way. Her fair, short hair hung seraph-wise round the delicate throat, whilst no angel ever depicted by the divine Raphael

himself, possessed sweeter, purer eyes or a more winning ingenuous smile.

"I have been looking for you everywhere. Mamma has sent me to you," she said in a voice of childish, affectionate concern, throwing herself on the rocky ground at the other's feet; then she added with an artless yet penetrating look, repeating her carefully-conned lesson as innocently as a five-year-old scholar, "Mamma is so unhappy about you. She hardly got any sleep last night."

The Frenchwoman had been so utterly taken aback by this sudden appearance that it took her some minutes to regain self-possession. Eva's child here, caressing her, after the cruel rebuke of the night before! She felt astounded, almost unable to credit the evidence of her senses. Eva prattled on, not of course in the least realizing the momentous issues at stake, having just taken her mother's words at their literal meaning—no more.

"Mamma is not going to Teniet-el-Haad after all; she will take me, she says, some day to Kabylia instead. We drive back to Algiers this very day, and we want you to go with us."

"My poor child!" began Jeanne, emboldened once more to stroke those golden curls, even to touch that fair young brow with her cold lips. "What you ask is impossible. It cannot, cannot be."

"Why cannot it be?" asked Eva, fixing her sweet, clear eyes on her companion's. "Mamma says that

you are going to enemies, to wicked people, and that you can never feel really happy among them. She wants you to stay with us for a time before you return to France. Oh, I should like it so much! Will you not do it to please me?"

Thus saying, without a trace of emotion or sentimentality, only giving way to the naturally affectionate impulses of youth, she put her arms round the other's neck and clasped her close. She was merely doing what she had been told to do, and at the same time yielding to a natural attraction for this beautiful, mysterious creature, her mother's old friend.

"And there is another thing," she said. "If you go to Teniet-et-Haad I am never so much as to mention your name any more."

"You are young and inexperienced; you cannot understand difficult lives like mine," Jeanne replied, gently breaking away from the fond embrace, casting off such sweet glamour. She *must* go on.

"But everybody's life is easier if spent with good people," the child continued. "And you are good, I am sure. You cannot be happy till you get back to your own little girls."

"We are not all of us made for happiness," Madame d'Arlay cried in a voice of passionate despair. It seemed to ring through these flowery wastes like the cry of some lost soul. "Go back, sweet child. Forget that I have ever crossed your guileless path."

Yet another innocent kiss pressed on the pale cheek,

then a long, pained, bewildered look of the candid eyes.

"As if I should forget!" Eva added with well tutored persistence, and she tried to think what she should say next. The poor child had come to an end of her stock of arguments learned by rote, she only comprehended in a dim, childish way, that here was some terrible unhappiness to be averted by the return to Algiers for which she was sent to plead. The beauty, the forlornness, the clinging tenderness of this lonely Frenchwoman perplexed, awed her. She began to realize somehow that words could not do any good, that here was a sorrow and a mystery her own sympathy could not reach, and this conviction brought a wholly new and angelic expression into the young face. It was not only pity and love shining in Evey's eyes now—pity and love Madame d'Arlay could have borne; but it was the look of shocked surprise, the consciousness of sudden contact with guilt and misery, that made her innocent scrutiny so retributive, so full of Heaven-sent meaning to the unhappy, shrinking Jeanne. Fascinated against her will, she tried to shake off the clinging caress of the child, to avert her wistful gaze, but in vain. Evey still clung to her, still looked at her with the voiceless, measureless, persuasion of purity and innocence, far off as heaven it had seemed to the fallen Jeanne a minute before, near as the field flowers at her feet once more. Again and again she had repeated to herself, she must go on. There was

the passionate love that had hitherto seemed a well-spring of joy in her arid life, and there was her word! But she was crushed, conscience-stricken, made weak by the artless utterances and fearless glances of a child. The tempter's voice that had enticed from afar, ceased to make itself heard. The vision of a life surrendered to self, yielded up to impulse, so bright before, faded from her mind. Only one thought held her captive—she belonged to duty and to her children.

That same morning Mrs. Langford's carriage set out for Algiers, and the vacant place beside her was occupied by a pale, pensive figure in a riding-habit. Only Eva's joyous prattle and childish enthusiasm rendered the journey endurable to the two long-parted friends who had made this fateful Halt on the Way.

THE MESSAGE.

THE MESSAGE.

I.

It was midnight, and two women awaited different messengers under one roof. To the elder, the slow-paced hours were bringing death; to the younger, a bridegroom. The faded mistress of the rich parvenu's home had lain down to die, facing the doom of all with the cold stoicism of the neglected and the unloved. Ready to take her place, impatient to clutch at the gauds the other despised, and to parade a triumph which should have been her dishonour, was the rival.

She was a young woman of course. Subtler feminine charms than bright eyes, rosy lips always parting in a smile, a slender figure, and audacious, girlish ways, were hardly likely to fascinate a man of John Harden's character—a man who had risen from the meanest ranks of life, spent his years in money-getting, and shunned rather than sought good company in the true sense of the word. To be put out of countenance by no one, had been a leading maxim of the money-maker's career; whilst therefore surrounding himself with all the glitter of opulence, he remained the blunt, plain-spoken homely John Harden of early days. He

was just sixty, and the girl busied with such affectation of demureness on some foolish boarding-school bead-work, could hardly be twenty. The pair sat opposite to each other by the fire, only interchanging a word from time to time, betraying nothing of their secret thoughts to chance eavesdroppers at the door. Yet despite such guarded speech, a quick observer must have seen at a glance how it stood with both; the girl's flushed cheek and sparkling eye, the man's look of suppressed satisfaction, told their own story. The dread messenger, whose name is Death, as he passed through this hushed house, made way for a joyous successor whom, under various guises, men call Love.

The hand of the costly time-piece on the mantelshelf pointed to twelve, and the mere sign seemed to chill the air. Mr. Harden rose to make up the fire, as he did so letting one hand fall on his companion's. "It is growing late and cold. Better go to bed, Constance," he said, in a voice of tender concern.

The girl, allowing herself for a moment to be carried away by impulse, leaned forward, her bright brown curls just touched his scant grey locks, her softly-rounded cheek just came in contact with his own, lined and corrugated with care.

"Should I leave you alone at such a time?" she whispered. He said nothing, but kneeling before the fire, making it up after methodical fashion, contrived at the same time to transfer from his waistcoat pocket to her not unwilling fingers, a minute box of crimson

leather lined with velvet. Within gleamed a wedding-ring, and as Constance Emery gazed upon it furtively, her lover's face showed exultation equal to her own.

To this shallow girl, the first glimpse of her wedding-ring meant everything that life itself could mean. She was nothing, possessed nothing; the ring would give her all she set store by, and render her exactly what she wished to become. It would throw the responsibility of her own existence upon another's shoulders, relieve her from the odious burden of bread-winning, afford ease, luxury, social power, and the kind of sway over an ordinary nature that by such women is made to do duty for affection. The ring, in short, was to open wide the portals of a career after her own heart, without it, unattainable as a crown. To the man also the ring symbolized the aspect of life most agreeable to him. In one respect, money-making had not rendered him callous. To his mind, a certain feminine type ever remained irresistible. Of ideal loveliness, of spiritual or intellectual beauty, it was not at all likely that he should have the remotest conception; but he owned the sway of frolicsome girlhood, the easy assurance of young, handsome, reckless women. To surface charms of look or manner, he was ever ready to do homage. But the ring had other and graver meaning for him. His first marriage had been childless. The enormous wealth amassed so laboriously lacked an heir. Might not a young wife make him the proud father of blooming children?

The tiny box consigned to its hiding-place, Mr. Harden fetched, from the lobby close by, a carriage cloak lined with rare fur, and bestowed it carefully about the girl's shoulders. He next went to the sideboard, and, half-filling a glass with wine, "Do not let yourself get chill or faint, then," he said softly, standing over her, glass in hand.

She just sipped the wine and put back the glass, smiling gratefully. He returned to the sideboard, swallowed the remainder of the wine, then sat down in his old place by the fire.

Just then the door was tapped lightly and an elderly, homely woman-servant made her appearance.

"If you please, sir," she said, without looking at the girl, "mistress is herself again, and asks for you."

Such a summons, unwelcome although it might be, was imperative. With a lingering look at the vision of life, youth and jollity left behind, Mr. Harden followed his hushed conductress to the chamber of death.

II.

It was a strikingly luxurious room, hung with rich arras of crimson silk, and carpets to match, in which the feet sank noiselessly. On each side of the Venetian looking-glass were handsome French candelabras supported by little Loves in tinted porcelain. On the dressing-table glittered silver-topped scent-bottles and a woman's small watch set with diamonds. The fire had been allowed to burn low, and only one small lamp lit

up the silent room and its solitary occupant—a worn, white-haired woman whose life was nearing its close.

It was easy to see that, like her husband, Mrs. Harden had not been born to such luxury as this; her physiognomy as well as his own indicated a homely origin. Her thin hands still showed evidence of laborious toil. The heavy silk curtains of warm red, and downy quilt covered with satin, were in strangest contrast with the look of the mistress. Twenty years of opulence had never familiarized her with it. To the last, she looked, as indeed she felt, a stranger in her own home.

"Go away, Anna," she said gently to the faithful peasant woman who had grown old in her service. "Leave us alone."

The husband realized at a glance what had happened. She had remembered something, been reminded of something she wanted to say to him at the last, and as will often happen in the case of the dying, a brief return of consciousness was accompanied by a momentary recovery of physical strength—last, bright, evanescent flicker of the flame of life.

The servant withdrew, and Mrs. Harden now beckoned the shrinking, conscience-stricken man to her bedside.

There had hitherto been no leave-taking between him and the faithful partner of well-nigh forty years. From the beginning of her illness, greatly to his relief, she had avoided anything approaching to close, con-

fidential talk, any allusion to the past or the future as they more immediately concerned themselves. He had taken care that everything money could do was done for her. A London physician had been summoned in consultation; all the concern that decorum exacted under the circumstances had been testified by him: he was constantly in the sick-room. But the solemn confidence, the final understanding, the supreme valediction that might be looked for from two human beings who had passed almost a lifetime together, had never been uttered.

Now it became clear to him that they were not to be separated thus. The opportunity for a last word had come, and she clutched at it with almost frenzied eagerness. The expression on her face he could not misread—she was determined to say what she had to say. She felt confident that death would afford her this grace—consent to hold aloof a little while.

"John," she began, gathering fire and force with every word, all the pent-up indignation of years poured forth at the last, "I have had something to say to you for years past. Now I must speak, or not at all."

"You ought not to agitate yourself, Bessie," he said nervously; "it will do you harm."

"Harm!" she reiterated with a gesture of contempt. "You speak of harm to a dying woman! But do not interrupt me. My time is short, John, I am not afraid to die. I have never been what is called a religious woman. I was never so tender-hearted to the poor

and afflicted as I see now that I ought to have been. But I have done my duty. As a wife, as a woman, I have acted uprightly. When the same moment comes to you, when the door stands open before you, as it does to me, between life and death, and you know you must go the dark way, can you say even so much for yourself?"

She leaned forward, not looking exactly at him, he could have borne that better, but peering as if into futurity, seeing, so he seemed to think, what lay behind the grave and was veiled from his own and from all mortals' gaze. The meanness, the homeliness of the woman vanished indeed then.

Something more than personal feeling, the indignation born of silently endured wrong, flashed from her dying eyes and white, almost spectral features. It was not the injured wife, the outraged woman so much that spoke now to John Harden's guilty soul, as the voice of conscience itself, of awful justice, of awarding doom.

"I have been a hypocrite to you all these years, I have never once opened my lips to you on the subject of your conduct to me," she went on in a supernaturally strong, clear voice. "But do you suppose I was blind or a fool? Those long, long winter evenings I dragged out as best I could alone, did I not know how they were spent by you? I was not going to flaunt myself before the world as an insulted wife, to court the neighbours' pity for the slights put upon me by my husband. No; I sat alone amid all this show so hateful to me,

with unspoken curses in my heart. What right had you to treat me thus? Was I the only one of us two to grow old and wrinkled? If our marriage was not blest with children, the misfortune was mine as well as yours. These things rest with the Almighty."

For a moment, a moment only, her voice swayed to real feeling as she continued,—

"There was a time, when life was a hard struggle to us, and you behaved kindly to me, I would have laid down my life to make you happy. And I was ever a true wife to you, John, you cannot deny that. Do you remember when we kept our little shop, how I used to sit up till past midnight ironing your shirts and mending your clothes? And the first time you were summoned to sit on a jury, I was so proud to have you go. I never told you that I sold my father's watch, the very watch he left me, to buy your black coat, and turn you out like a gentleman. And now—"

Yet one tremor more as she got out the rest of the sentence.

"And now, had you treated me with the consideration due to a wife, had you cared for me at all, I should be the first to say to you on my dying bed—'Do not fret, my dear; marry some good woman; try to be happy for my sake.'"

Then she did indeed look at him, penetratingly and with a startling fixedness that seemed to search his very soul. Clenching her hand as if between himself and her stood her deadliest foe, she added,—

"Do I not know what will happen as soon as I am put in my grave? In spite of your caution, I see well enough who is waiting to take my place. Marry that ungrateful girl we picked out of the gutter. Ring the joy bells a year hence at the birth of a son and heir. No good will come of it. Conscience will crush you, unclean heart, perjured tongue! You will tremble when Death stands near you, beckoning as he now beckons me, and tremble in vain—"

White as the dying woman, the husband leaned forward with a word of exculpation, an entreaty for pardon on his trembling lips. But it was too late. The force of ebbing life had already spent itself. Mrs. Harden fell back unconscious on the pillow, and as he caught her in his arms, he saw that the end had come. The faithful Anna hearing his cry for help, hastened to the bedside to find her mistress dead.

III.

So enticing the warmth of that luxurious fur-lined cloak, so soft and easy the armchair in which her patron had settled her, that Constance Emery felt ready to drowse. But her brain was too busy with the future to indulge in sleep. She must, would keep awake, in order to think out the future as it opened itself to her enlarging gaze. Perhaps the girl was not deserving of wholesale condemnation after all. Vulgarity may indeed be a piece of ill-fortune, as much as a wry nose or misshapen foot; only to the rarely endowed ones is

it possible to burst the chains of custom, bringing-up and heredity.

In the midst of foolishly bewildering dreams of silks and trinkets, carriages and lacqueys, boudoirs and fashionable receptions, she was aroused by the abruptest intrusion. Rising to her feet, for she knew well who the intruder must be, she was fain to clasp his hand, to whisper an endearing word, to greet him fondly as she had done surreptitiously scores of times before. But at a glance towards her patron, her heart stood still. Clever she was not, feminine tact she possessed in a moderate degree, yet she realized in a moment, without knowing the cause, the nature of the transformation that had come over him. She stood aghast, not venturing a step forward, lacking courage even so much as to utter his name.

He came close up to the table by which she stood, holding in his hand a small strip of paper barred with pink.

"Constance," he said in that brief, hard, unanswerable voice she knew so well, though now used for the first time to her—"Constance, I cannot marry you. I shall never marry again. Here is compensation for a broken promise."

He turned up the lamp in order that she might see what he had given her. There, it was plain enough, nothing could be plainer, a cheque for five thousand pounds.

The astounded girl was dumb, and he hardly knew

whether as yet she fully understood the meaning of his words. Something else he had to say, however, unmistakably clear and to the purpose also.

"It will be better for you not to stay here any longer. I have ordered coffee to be ready by six o'clock, and the brougham at half-past, in time to catch the early express. William will drive you to the station, and give you a first-class ticket. Mind and be ready."

Still not a word from the scarlet-cheeked, mortified, trembling girl. Had any one half an hour before assured Constance Emery that she should thus stand silent and abashed in the presence of this man, she would have laughed the prognostication to scorn.

But with that quick, unerring instinct of the dull, the instinct born of fear and self-preservation, she now recognized the fact for herself. There was nothing she could say to soften him even were she mistress of herself, blandishments, exhortation, tears, would all prove ineffectual as children's dams to keep out the tide.

Something had happened—she vaguely guessed the truth—to shut him from her, to harden him towards her for ever.

Whilst she stood thus, shrinking, irresolute, unable to get out a syllable, yet feeling that she ought to say something on her own behalf, another significant act told her clearly enough, were proofs still wanting, of what was in Mr. Harden's mind. The rich fur-lined cloak in which he had so tenderly enveloped her just an hour ago, lay on the ground. In her startled surprise,

it had fallen from her shoulders. She now saw him pick it up, and, with a gesture not to be mistaken, lay it, carefully folded, on his wife's favourite chair at the extreme end of the room. That cloak she was not to touch again. Then he left her, in a moment more to return. Constance Emery looked up, and once more her heart stood still. He had repented of this cruel abruptness, this undeserved coldness, and was come to whisper a tender word in her ear, to console her for what he had perhaps been forced into by a death scene. He came back to the table, leaving the door ajar.

"Take good care of that piece of paper," was all he said as he pointed to the cheque.

CHÂTEAU ROMAN.

CHÂTEAU ROMAN.

One by one the historic châteaux of France are passing into the hands of the rich bourgeoisie. As the English traveller journeys through the country, guide-book in hand, this fact naturally escapes his observation. He sees a splendid old pile from the railway, and identifies it with the description given by Murray; he obtains sight of a famous bit of architecture in another, a celebrated garden belonging to a third; and there the matter ends. Of the social transformation that has come over these palatial dwellings of the olden time, he learns nothing. Only those who live in France among French people realise history as it is being written there under their own eyes.

Last autumn I happened to be the guest of a country gentleman residing on his own estate in the Angoumais. Perhaps I should use the definition gentleman farmer, since M. Hervé attended to the business of farming upwards of a thousand acres himself, went regularly to market, kept his own accounts, and dispensed altogether with the services of steward or bailiff. Busy as he was, however, and rural as were

his tastes, he yet found time to show me all that was most worth seeing in the neighbourhood; he was also, like most of his country people, full of local information. Under his roof I wanted, therefore, neither guide-book nor departmental geography. Everything a stranger wanted to know he could tell me.

"I propose, this afternoon," he said one day at déjeuner, "to drive you to Château Roman; quite the most curious thing to be seen in our department."

"Château Roman? Château Roman?" I asked. "The place has surely some other name, for neither our English Murray, nor your own Joanne, so much as makes the slightest allusion to such a place."

"The fact is," my host continued, as he quietly cut up a turkey no larger than a spring chicken—why we keep our turkeys till they are as big as sheep, I cannot conceive—"the fact is—I hope you like truffles? —Château Roman was formerly known as Château Chabot-Charny, so called after that noble family—permit me, a glass of Sauterne—who gave so many steadfast adherents to the Protestant cause in France. The last of the house dying without issue, the château changed owners many times, finally passing into the hands of a rich speculator—allow me, a little salad? —and he has turned it into a fabrique de romans, a novel manufactory."

"A novel manufactory?" I cried, dropping knife and fork.

"Certainly," he said, "a veritable fabrique de

romans. We have a great variety of manufactures in these parts, indeed, I may say, throughout the entire country. Pill factories, picture factories—shoes, skirts, spectacles, you can hardly mention an article, either for use or ornament, that we do not now make by machinery in France. Machine-made work is not only cheaper, more expeditious than anything of the kind to be turned out by hand, it is so superior, so undeniably superior."

My host, though the most practical man in the world, could yet thoroughly appreciate a joke when it came in his way. I see at once, therefore, that he was not making fun of me now. He went on quite naturally, "The name may sound odd to you, perhaps—une fabrique de romans! Yes, I admit that when one hears of it for the first time one might suppose the whole thing to be a hoax. But reflect for a moment. There is nothing in the least laughable about the matter. Books of other kinds have long since been made by machinery—diaries, almanacks, catechisms, manuals of devotion, cookery-books, song-books, dictionaries, and works of reference of various sorts. Newspapers, too, up to a certain point, may be said to be manufactured. Youths are now regularly apprenticed to the journalistic trade as to any other. Where, then, is the incongruity? Machine-made novels are not only cheaper than hand-made, but better adapted to the requirements of the age. I certainly prefer them myself. As I say, then, we will drive this afternoon and look over the whole concern."

"Then Château Roman is an appropriate name,' I said.

"Above all, a name easy to remember! In these days of telegraph, telephone, and all the rest of it, a colossal undertaking like that of this fabrique de romans must not only be à propos, but unmistakeably, named. Now, out of the scores of places, the names of which begin with Château in France, there is none that could possibly be confused with Château Roman. The name, too, speaks for the thing. Any fool must know what it means. Jean," here my host turned to the dexterous young fellow waiting at table, a rustic, yet clever and handy, "Jean, the pony carriage and the mare, if you please, at half-past one o'clock to go to Château Roman."

Château Roman forms a striking object as the traveller speeds by railway through the heart of the Angoumais. High above the dark river tumbling over its rocky bed, high above old-world tower, hanging gardens and smiling valley, high above frowning granite peak and rich chestnut woods, it rises in all its primitive massiveness and splendour. The vast pile is built of the dark grey limestone of the district, shining with a metallic lustre in the bright September sunshine, and with its lofty towers surmounted by pinnacles, its oubliettes and ramparts, still recalls the gloomy fortified castle of the Middle Ages. A cradle of tragedy, rather

than comedy, it looked, whence should issue novels as terrible as any invention of human fancy.

"You observe that, as far as possible, the historic aspect of the place has been preserved," my host said. "To do that was a patriotic duty; but my neighbour, the enterprising director, felt it incumbent upon him to show such respect to the exterior only. Inside—the place was fast falling to ruin, so that it was absolutely necessary to do something—you will find all modern, lightsome, airy. The outlook at the back too, where a part of the old wall has been pulled down, is quite charming. You can see over half the department."

We drove on for another mile or so under the over-arching plane trees, then the road took a sudden bend, and we were making straight for the portcullis.

"You will wonder, I dare say," my host said, "that the head of such a concern as this should not be a lady. My country-women, as all the world knows, are largely gifted with the administrative faculty. Unfortunately, however, few of them have as yet that amount of general knowledge, above all, that literary experience necessary in the directors of a fabrique de romans, a novel manufactory. The physical as well as mental strain also, involved in the management of so complicated a business, would overtax the powers of most women. Now in the person of Monsieur Quarante—but here we are."

The mere shell of the frowning portcullis was of course all that was left. The vast courtyard was open,

and we drove straight across to the conciergerie or porter's lodge. Immediately a couple of employés came running out, and from the attention we received I could easily see how well my host stood in general estimation hereabouts.

"I have brought a friend to look over the establishment," he said to the man at the mare's head. "Can we see Monsieur the director, think you?"

"Monsieur the director won't refuse you," replied the man, "but he is overwhelmed with business just now."

"Trade is pretty brisk, then?" asked M. Hervé, as he watched the pair of grooms take out the carriage.

"Brisker than ever," answered the other. "If everything sold like novels, we should hear of no more honest folk wanting bread in France."

The mare was then led to the stables, and we betook ourselves to the director's office, I meantime glancing to the right and to the left, above and below.

The interior of the quadrangle presented a striking contrast to the façade. Whilst the latter had been preserved in all its pristine picturesqueness and splendour, within everything had been sacrificed to utility, agreeableness, and health. In fact, only the shell of the mediæval château remained. Its appearance inside was that of any ordinary manufactory. Bureaux of the various departments, post office, offices of telegraph and telephone, occupied the ground floor; above, the large,

lofty, well-ventilated ateliers showed a busy, yet quiet multitude at work. The one feature indeed distinguishing this factory from any other was the absence of deafening noises. Neither mill-wheel, steam engine, nor hammer grated harshly on the ear, there was only the sound of people moving about and hushed voices.

"Good day, M. Hervé, my respects to you," said the cheerful, bustling, as it seemed to me, somewhat overdone director. "So you have brought this gentleman to see over the manufactory? Nothing easier! I only wish I had more time at your disposal."

M. Hervé placed his hand on the other's shoulder with that almost affectionate cordiality which is permitted in France.

"Come, no ceremony among old friends. If you are really occupied, let us be consigned to one of your clerks."

"No such thing, not for worlds; on no account whatever," was the hearty answer. "I regret that I cannot show your friend over every department, but I will conduct you to the most important. Sit down, gentlemen; have the goodness to sit down for five minutes, two minutes, one minute, then I will be ready."

We sat down. M. Quarante, with extraordinary expeditiousness, then opened half-a-dozen telegrams just brought in, pencilled a word on each, numbered them for transmission to their respective departments, and dismissed the porter. Next he drew forth a telegram form, and sat for a moment, with pen behind his ear,

in deep thought. Finally he rose, laid an impatient hand on the paper.

"Everything in the ordinary line of business is easy enough," he said, looking half distracted. "It is these accidents, these unexpected dilemmas, that are so difficult to cope with—conceive, for instance, the awkwardness of the situation. We have just turned out an order for the country, and, as requested, each story was to have a quiet murder in it—nothing horrible, you know; horrors are not in fashion just now. But as ill-luck would have it, a real murder of most audacious nature has happened in those parts, and people are so nervous that they won't read anything to remind them of it; they won't have anything in the murder way at all. So our thirty serials are shunted till Heaven knows when, and I must supply thirty more within four-and-twenty hours."

"I presume," my host said, kindly interviewing the director for my benefit, "I presume you do a good stroke of business with the country newspapers?"

"The very thews and sinews of war, sir; but for the country newspapers our hands would be thrown out of work like the silk-weavers at Lyons. Newspapers have increased enormously of late years. Nowadays, thanks to the division of parties, every little town has half-a-dozen, and each has its own serial story."

"Do financial and other crises affect your business much?" asked my host again, on the alert to obtain information for me.

"Not in the least. There was the war with Prussia and the siege of Paris, for instance. One might have supposed that when people had neither bite nor sup, and the enemy was at their very doors, they would not have felt much interest in novels. Quite the contrary. The more depressed and miserable folks were, the more avidity they showed for fiction. On my word, it was as much as we could do to supply the demand."

"In the way of exports, now?" inquired M. Hervé.

"Ah! there you hit another nail on the head. Our export trade is, after all, what really keeps us going. You see, Germany cuts into our home manufactures in cutlery, woollen stuffs, toys. Belgium undersells us in the matter of ironware and machinery. We cannot compete, or anything like compete, with English cotton goods, hardware, comestibles of all kinds; but confound them all—a thousand pardons, sir—I defy them all to hurt our novel trade. We do a good deal with Russia (a special manufacture that), the Argentine Republic, Buenos Ayres, the Brazils, Cochin China, and Zanzibar. These countries stand first; but small steady orders come in from various parts of the world. The Steam Navigation Companies come to us, especially at certain seasons of the year, and then—bless my soul, I was very near forgetting Japan! We do more with Japan every year. Then I was very near forgetting that, too, the religious orders are excellent customers. You see, priests and monks cannot read their breviary all day long; they may be as pious as Thomas Aquinas himself,

but they must amuse themselves sometimes. Again, the hospitals, lunatic asylums, and prisons, you would never believe how many novels sick people, crazy people, and thieves and murderers read! Of course, the more we manufacture the cheaper we can do it."

"You hinted just now at a special manufacture for the Russian market?" asked my host. "Is it indiscreet to ask an explanation of that remark?"

"By no means, not in the very least," was the reply. "I am entirely at your service. Well, Russia, you see, is in a very critical condition just now. People may not write about certain subjects; anything in the way of revolutionary doctrine is tabooed. But in our novels we may plot as much as we please; and we do plot with a vengeance, I can tell you. You understand then, we give a flavouring of Socialism in the article made up for the Russian market."

"And—humph—I imagine from what I have read of them, that your novels are highly moral?" added M. Hervé.

"That they are, I warrant you. The fact is, let folks say what they will, bad morals, as far as novels are concerned, are no longer the fashion in France. I say nothing of Paris, I speak of the country in general. I am a husband and father myself, and, if novel manufacturing meant the propagation of vice, I should set to work to fabricate pills or chassepôts instead. I don't say there is no wickedness, levity, or crime in our novels. Would they read like real life without? But we punish

them, sir, soundly too, as I am sorry to say they are seldom punished in reality; whilst as to the virtuous, they live like our forefathers in Paradise! This is one reason why people like our novels. Justice is dealt all round. Well, now for our survey."

He dashed off his reply to the telegram before alluded to; with equal expedition wrote a couple of orders for transmission to two departments; despatched all three, then led us to a commodious lift-room.

"Do all your hands live on the premises?" asked M. Hervé, when we had taken our seats.

"All, without exception. Of course the most rigid supervision is exercised. The slightest infringement of decorum, the breaking of a single rule entails summary dismissal. We are now then in the ladies' department," he said, as we were landed on the second storey. "Yonder is the bureau of the directress, here the ateliers. Number One is the millinery department."

We both expressed so much astonishment at this latter piece of information that our guide felt bound to explain himself.

"I suppose it strikes few people how essential is a knowledge of millinery in the manufacture of a novel! But the truth is that readers, especially country readers, and those of little general instruction, delight in nothing so much as to be told what people wear! The heroine's dress, upon important occasions, is often the really most interesting feature about her, and who so fit to

describe ladies' dresses as ladies themselves? Given situation, age, complexion, nationality, epoch, and there you are! Note, too, the inevitable superiority of the machine-made novel in this respect. We get the thing done by an expert, whilst novelists on their own account, of the female sex, may be dowdies, and, therefore, quite incapable of turning out a well-dressed woman on paper; if of the other, they are sure to make absurd blunders."

He opened the door of the atelier, and we glanced in without disturbing its occupants. It was a vast, well-lighted, airy apartment, in aspect not unlike the reading-room of a provincial library. In the centre was a large table covered with illustrated magazines, fashion books, and society journals; whilst around, placed at intervals of a yard or two, and shut off one from the other by a screen, were a score of small tables. At each sat a lady, neatly dressed in black, busily writing. For the most part these writers were middle-aged, and of that elegant yet staid appearance we find in the assistants of large shops in Paris. Handsome bookshelves, filled with works of reference, occupied every bit of available wall space. Not a sound was heard but the scratching of a pen, or the turning over of leaves. The director closed the door gently, and we walked on a few steps.

"Every indulgence is shown our hands out of working hours, but absolute silence is obligatory inside the atelier," he said. "You see, my countrywomen are so fond of discussion, aud naturally so sociable that, if this

rule were once relaxed, the place would become a perfect Babel. We now come to another field given up to the sex, that is, the love-making department."

"Is this invariably the case?" asked my host, looking extremely interested. Being a bachelor and a prodigious novel-reader, his fancy was tickled by this last piece of information.

"Invariably," rejoined M. Quarante. "You see, ladies love this sort of thing, and the younger they are, and the less they know about it, the better they do their work. It stands to reason. Take myself, for instance, on the treadmill of business from morning till night, with daughters to provide for, sons to start in life, how on earth could I sit down to write a love scene for a novel? Now, these young ladies—all the hands in this department are young—are naturally romantic, and it is the easiest thing in the world for them to imagine one love scene after another. It is wonderful how well they do it! At least so our customers say. Of course, I consult the general taste in everything."

He opened the door of the second atelier and revealed to us much the same scene as before. Except in one particular. All the occupants of the writing-tables here were young, and some very pretty.

"Mon Dieu!" whispered my host, "I should like to go round this room; mightn't we do it on tiptoe, now?"

The good-natured director smiled compliance, and all three, speaking only in whispers, and on tiptoe, so

that our creaking boots might not disturb the fair workers, slowly made the circuit of the room. M. Hervé lagged behind sadly. By the time we were at the farther end he was only in the middle, and when we had reached the door again he had only just turned the corner. Indeed, so fascinated was he by the spectacle, that our conductor had all the difficulty in the world to get him out of the room again.

The young ladies, I must say, behaved remarkably well under the trying ordeal. They plied their pens as if unaware of our intrusion, away they scribbled automatically, more like writing-machines than creatures of flesh and blood. Only one turned her head!

"A very handsome girl, that, in the corner," observed M. Hervé, when at last we had succeeded in getting him out of the atelier. The girl he spoke of was the one who had turned her head.

"Handsome or ugly, it is all one to us," replied M. Quarante coolly. "Good looks here, moreover, are less of a snare than you might suppose. Many of our male hands are married, and, as I said before, nothing in the shape of light conduct is permitted for a moment."

"From what class do you recruit these young ladies?" I ventured to ask.

"As a rule they are certificated students, daughters of middle-class parents who, provided with their diploma, have to make their own way in the world. They generally quit us to join the staff of a newspaper or to take a Professorship of Belles Lettres at some lycée for girls.

The training they get here is invaluable to them in after life. Then—only time presses too much for me to show you all—there is the geographical or picturesque department. That also we hand over to the ladies. People in novels, you see, like people in real life, must live somewhere, and it is very desirable that their place of abode should be accurately described. Descriptions of Touraine, for instance, must in a novel read like Touraine, not Auvergne or the Jura Mountains; towns, rivers, geological formation—how important, how necessary is extreme accuracy here! Our ladies have every facility, gazetteers, maps, works of travel, and often—that they like immensely—we despatch them on a journey to some especial place in order to describe it from personal observation. These hands are extremely well paid. Music again: the musical section is entirely given up to the fair sex. It seldom happens that a novel can be called complete without some music in it; a musical party is wanted, or details of some vocalist's début, and so on, and so on. All this we get done by trained specialists, often pupils of the Conservatoire. Again, the subject of etiquette forms a separate department, managed by a small staff of experienced ladies: not young these, mostly retired actresses—as we say in France, of a certain age. In a dramatic country like our own, where the peasants and the smallest roturier, are constantly rising in the social scale, where the little shopkeeper of to-day may be the great personage of to-morrow, novels would be nowhere unless they are

authorities on the subject of etiquette. Our country readers delight in nothing so much as elaborate accounts of dinner-parties, dances, ceremonies, and social entertainments of all kinds, so we put in as many as possible, and omit nothing in the way of information that may be useful. Once more, there is what is called æsthetics—in other words, artistic furniture, upholstery, the proper arrangement of a room. This, like etiquette, is a very popular theme in novels; so useful, you see, to self-made people who are going into a big house and don't know how to furnish it, any more than to behave in it when they get there. Would you like to see this last-named department?"

"Humph—I suppose—may I ask—are these ladies young?" asked Mr. Hervé.

"Of various ages, middle-aged, most of them; retired teachers with an aptitude for literature. They have a most valuable library of reference, and in their way are very learned. We get much praised for the descriptions of interiors in our novels. Well, as you don't seem specially anxious to see the ladies at work, we will take the lift and go a storey higher."

"Here," began M. Quarante, as we alighted on the third storey, "are three highly-important departments, the legal, the medical, and the police. I should rather say two, since the detection of crime comes within the scope of law and medicine. We have first-rate men for this work, and a pleasant time they have of it, I assure you. Much easier to get clients through law-suits, cure

them of mortal diseases, track down thieves, murderers, and revolutionists on paper here than in real life! And what blunders novelists on their own account make when they attempt such matters! Readers who want accuracy must come to us."

My host did not testify any lively interest in M. Quarante's first-rate men, nor, in truth, was there anything remarkable about their appearance. They looked very cheerful over their work, as well they might. Many a briefless barrister and struggling medical man would thankfully exchange the realities of his profession for the easy tasks of the Château Roman.

"We used, in former days, to do a good deal in the poison way," said our conductor as we continued our survey; "the fashion is, however, changed, and readers now prefer to see people in novels die a natural death. Duelling, however, is still in high favour, and here our medical writers come in very handy. They know where the ball will prove fatal, and where it won't. Well, next for philosophy and literature. We have much more need of these now than formerly. Our customers like to be told in their stories what the learned read, and how they talk. Of course we don't treat all novels alike. Some contain no philosophy or literature properly speaking, but all make mention of books. We always allude to the libraries when describing our country houses, and are very particular as to the books named. Immorality, atheism, vulgarity, we will have nothing to do with. Then, little conversations about books—

country folks delight in that sort of thing; it is really a kind of education for them. You see, there are many points to consider in the manufacture of a novel."

The philosophic and literary staff of the establishment was small. We only found half-a-dozen gentlemen plying their pens in the service of these important subjects. The next department, however, was like a beehive.

"Ah!" cried our director, "I was very nearly forgetting one of the most important sections of all, that of Nomenclature. No one who has not himself gone into the business would believe the trouble that names give in novels; Christian names, surnames, names of places, names of residences. Where you consider that each novel requires thirty or more names, and that we manufacture dozens in a week, you will not wonder at seeing so many employés at work here."

"On what principle do you select your names?" asked M. Hervé.

He had been a little absent since that glimpse of the handsome girl in the corner, but was now recovering animation.

"At the head of this department," replied M. Quarante, "we have an experienced critic and littérateur, who is supposed to be cognisant of every novel that has ever been written in the polite languages of Europe——"

"Heavens!" cried M. Hervé, "what a capacious memory that man must have!"

"It is the business of this gentleman's subordinates," continued our director, "to furnish him with a list of all the Christian and surnames proposed for every novel put in hand. He just glances down the column and strikes out all that are hackneyed or commonplace."

"And the names of the stories themselves?" I ventured to enquire.

"That is not so difficult a matter as at first sight you might imagine. The same official sees to it. In nine cases out of ten the name of the hero, heroine, or place in which either resides will suffice. If this expedient fails, the first and last chapters of the book are skimmed, and some phrase extracted that will do duty as a title. People are not over-particular as to titles of novels. After all, call it what you will, it is a novel we give them. They know that well enough."

"There is one other question I should like to put if not impertinent," said my host. "You show us the ingredients and the kitchen, but where is the head cook? Who puts the story together?"

"Ah! the plot. I have been expecting that question all along. Oddly enough, this part of the business gives us the least trouble of any. Plots, in the accepted sense of the word, are no longer obligatory; they may indeed be said to be out of date altogether, as far as the domestic novel is concerned. Take hand-made novels for instance. A girl shilly-shallies with a man she cares about through one volume; marries another she doesn't care about in a second; is miserable in a third. There

is your plot. That is the true American style. Of course we sometimes get large orders for sensational stories. People like them in winter, when trade is dull or during a cholera epidemic. Creepy stories then enliven their spirits. Well, you will smile when I inform you that I concoct the plots myself."

"Heavens!" again ejaculated M. Hervé.

"I am in the position of a bonnet manufacturer," pursued the director. "A bonnet manufacturer could not make a bonnet to save his life. He does not in the least know how he should feel in a bonnet, or why one bonnet pleases and another does not. That is precisely my case. I could not write a novel if my very existence depended upon it. I can't conceive how people feel who care for novels or who write them, but I know what will sell and what won't. What I do is this: I just keep my eyes open, read the newspapers, glance at the reviews, jot down in a note-book any uncommon incident I read or hear of, and in this way accumulate an enormous, an inexhaustible supply of raw material. Then once a week I talk over matters with my literary staff, and they put a certain number of novels in hand. Sometimes we turn out a hundred a week."

"Is it possible?" asked M. Hervé, "and each unlike the other?"

"No, I won't say that. Novel readers are not so over-particular as to require that. I often wonder seeing how much one story is like another, why readers should not take a novel as they do a husband or a

wife, for once and for all, and read it over and over again as long as they live. It would really be the same thing in the end, although, fortunately for us, they do not think so."

We had now descended to the ground floor and re-entered the director's bureau.

"This is the raw material I spoke of just now," he said, pointing to a little library of albums in glass book-shelves. "Here you will see every incident we can possibly need arranged alphabetically."

He took down a volume at random and as he turned over the pages read the heads of the subjects therein treated: "Marriages, a marriage in a prison—ah! that is a newspaper cutting. Marriage of a French officer in Algeria and a Moorish girl (by the way, we do a good deal in Algeria and make up a special article for the colony), that was a fact I heard of. Marriage followed by divorce within four-and-twenty hours —extract from a trial that. Marriage on a death-bed —the incident happened in this very village; and so on, and so on. Now I take down another volume. Wills! ah, where would novel manufacturers be without wills? This volume is entirely made up of newspaper cuttings on the subject of wills, and a very curious collection it is; we are constantly having recourse to it. Again, the next volume I open is devoted to Law-suits; you observe many of the extracts here are made in writing. People are very fond of going to law in France,

and everybody has heard of a dozen cases in his own family."

He ran his eye along the shelf, and added: "Murders, Accidents, Duels, Quarrels, Polish Counts—and so on, and so on—well, you have here an epitome of modern French fiction. And of course we add to our stock-in-trade every day."

My friend now glanced at me, as much as to say, was my curiosity satisfied? It really seemed to me as if we had interviewed the obliging director long enough. Yet I ventured to put one question more.

"And your opinion, Monsieur le Directeur, as to the respective merits of the two articles—the machine-made versus the hand-made article?"

"You have it, sir, in a few words. The advantage is altogether on our side. In former days, when novel-writing was confined to men and women of genius, it was all very well, but the spread of education and literature has altered this. People sit down to write novels nowadays, who are no more fitted for the task than the King of the Cannibal Islands. They do it for money, just as we do. What is the result? We can turn out a very superior article at a fraction of the cost, grammar irreproachable, facts all correct, incidents true to nature, morals attended to, and everything made to hang properly together. Beside which—mark the fact—as we are not paid like the individual writer, by the piece, we make our stories as short as we please. Not

a line is added just for the sake of making them longer."

"There is a great deal in that," said I.

"To tell you the plain truth," put in my host, "that is why I have long since given up the hand-made for the machine-made novels. The padding in the former became at last insupportable to me. But good day, good day, M. le Directeur, a thousand thanks for your kind reception."

"I only regret that I have not more time to give you," said M. Quarante as he accompanied us to the door of his bureau. "Ah, what a charming afternoon for a drive! I envy you, gentlemen, who read novels instead of having to fabricate them. Au revoir, au revoir!"

"Âme de Voltaire," ejaculated M. Hervé, as we drove off. "Who would have thought that the making of a novel was so elaborate a process! Well, thank heaven, if geniuses have died out, we shall never suffer from a dearth of fiction, thanks to Château Roman!"

MARGUERITES, LES MARGUERITES!

MARGUERITES, LES MARGUERITES!

CHAPTER I.

It was a half-holiday, the usual Thursday's half-holiday, in the Technical School for Girls, at Grand Ville-sur-Loire; and the large, bare building was deserted. Mademoiselle Blanc, the somewhat rigid, yet coquettish middle-aged directress, seizing the opportunity for wearing her new Parisian bonnet and mantle, had taken a fiacre and set out on a round of visits.

Mariette, the good-natured, giggling maid-of-all-work, who, with a very small proportion of brains, contrived to get through the work of three ordinary domestics, had slipped out for a couple of hours' gossip and flirtation.

No one was left in the big, silent house but poor little Marguerite, the resident under-teacher, and the cat, who had three kittens, to keep her company, and the perpetual excitement of the sparrows to amuse her.

So cunning were the birds, that Minette stood no more chance of catching one than of jumping to the moon. The tantalising prospect charmed nevertheless, and could she have been made to understand that

throughout her entire career no sparrow should become her prey, she would have been the most miserable cat alive.

The weather was bright and inspiriting. It would be difficult surely to feel low-spirited on the first real spring day; difficult also to stay within doors, unless they were barred and bolted.

Why, then, was not eighteen-years-old Marguerite abroad? Nothing in the shape of duty kept her at home. A young governess, accustomed to walk about alone, might ramble in the suburban meadows without comment. She would be sure to find pupils and comrades there. Why did she linger? For half an hour she had sauntered from one empty class-room to another, in a mind of wistful indecision. The sunshine and the thought of the daisies made her long to be in the fields; her hat, parasol, and basket were ready. Yet she looked at the clock, as if counting the minutes, and lingered on.

"The postman must be very late, or have I let him pass?" mused Marguerite. "Then there is no letter for me. Pierre has not written by this mail; something is wrong."

That monthly letter from her cousin Pierre was the only event in the girl's even life. To the imagination of the orphan—portionless and dependent on her own exertions for bread—the dim figure of the young naval officer represented a tower of strength—a haven against all future ills. Neither Pierre nor Marguerite knew exactly how the compact had been brought about; but

it was an understood thing between the pair, that, some day, they were to be married. Nothing, to be called love-making, had ever taken place either by word of mouth or on paper. They had not met since childhood. But Pierre seemed the natural protector of his only uncle's only child. Perhaps a chivalrous sentiment, a sense of obligation, actuated him in thus acting the part of a protector. Marguerite, for her part, loved him; loved nothing else, she said to herself.

With a little sigh, and a half inclination to weep, at last she put on her hat and went downstairs. Yes, it was good to be holiday-making on such a day. She would not waste a whole Thursday afternoon in vain regrets.

Through the glittering streets she hastened, then, leaving the grand old cathedral behind, she turned towards the quays, with their noble avenues, palaces of rich ship-owners, and crowded masts, from which stream flags of all nations.

There is this peculiarity about Grand Ville-sur-Loire, that the forest and river have reached the very heart of the city, and between bustling wharves and shady boulevards—haunt of loungers—runs the railway, lending still more animation to the scene. Beyond, far as the eye can reach, flows the Loire, its broad blue surface broken by many a green islet. All is here—the freshness of the woods, the stir of a great seaport, the calm beauty of a river.

Many a little steamer plied between quay and sub-

urb; omnibuses rattled along the streets in the same direction; the railway also set down passengers at the extremity of the town.

But Marguerite trudged on contentedly. She could not have walking enough on a Thursday's half-holiday, and the sight of the ships always delighted her. It recalled her sailor. Past market-gardens and orchards she hastened, till at last the meadows were reached, and the ox-eyed daisies. Daisies, daisies everywhere. She might have supposed them a precious, marketable crop, from the myriads of large gold and silver stars. Precious, indeed, they were; but in no marketable sense. Money could not buy such delights as the ox-eyed daisies gave now. The meadows were alive with merry voices, for Marguerite had been forestalled hours before.

Eager as the rest, Marguerite was soon ankle-deep in flowering grasses and daisies. With flushed cheeks, and lips parted in a smile, she first cut off the finest flower-heads for the adornment of Mademoiselle Blanc's drawing-room; then she gathered promiscuously for herself, and, seeking a sheltered nook, proceeded to wreathe her hat. The daisy was her namesake and favourite flower. Not the rose itself was dearer to her. Thus occupied, and childishly intent upon the task, she took no heed of a man's voice calling her name.

"Marguerites, les marguerites!" cried the intruder; but not till he was quite near, and repeated the words standing opposite to her, did Marguerite look up.

"Marguerites, les marguerites!" he repeated, looking from the pretty flower-weaver to the spoils in her lap.

"Monsieur le Professeur!" exclaimed the girl, starting to her feet with a blush, and letting all her treasures fall to the ground.

Was it not beneath the dignity of an under-teacher to trim her hat with wild flowers, after the manner of a child?

"Monsieur Vincent!" she ejaculated, much as if his appearance in such a place were phenomenal. Nothing, on the contrary, was more natural. The hard-worked Professor welcomed his weekly holiday with the zeal of his youngest pupil. To-day, the sunshine and the daisies made the middle-aged, at times discouraged, mathematical master feel ten years younger.

"Monsieur Vincent, and why not?" he said, smiling, at the same time putting his hand in his pocket and eyeing her a little mysteriously. "But, to tell you the truth, Mademoiselle Marguerite, I have been running after you. See how heated I am!" His right hand still fumbled in his outer pocket. "The fact is," he added, "hardly had you quitted the house when I happened to be passing by and met a great, a very great friend of yours. Guess what he gave me for you?"

That sea-letter, arriving so regularly, was no secret to the orphan's protectors and well-wishers. Mademoiselle Blanc, Monsieur Vincent, daily lecturer in geometry, and one or two others, all knew what this little Marguerite's future was to be. The pale, slender girl, beautiful by

reason of her large, dark, pathetic eyes, was a general favourite, and all wished a joyous sequel to these foolish dreams.

The Professor would occasionly venture upon a little jest, if the monthly missive failed to appear; would predict Pierre's forthcoming marriage with some dusky beauty of the South Sea Islands, and tease her by a dozen stories in point.

"It was the postman. You have my letter!" she cried, with cheeks aflame, and glistening eyes. "Oh, I feel sure you have my letter!"

"What will you give me for it? All those daisies?" he asked, as he slowly produced the treasure.

Yes; it had come, the accustomed ship-letter; and, as she fondly persuaded herself, bulkier than usual. Her face became radiant. Without heeding the playful query, without so much as a word of thanks to the kind bearer, she caught the joy-gift from his hands, and leaving hat, daisies, and parasol by his side, hid herself in a little copse close by, there to devour her lover's letter.

CHAPTER II.

The Professor watched these movements smiling, not without impatience. He had no desire to spend the whole afternoon in the meadow; he had, indeed, projected a ten miles' walk across country. But she had evidently left him in charge of her belongings. It would not be polite, it would not be friendly to abandon them;

whilst, to intrude upon her solitude at such a moment was quite out of the question. So, resigning himself to the situation, he took off his straw hat, manipulated a cigarette, produced the "Journal des Débats," and began to read.

He was an ardent politician, and the state of public affairs just then was absorbing; yet, somehow, he found his thoughts apt to wander. Finally, the journal was thrown aside, and a second cigarette twisted into proper shape.

"What a long time that little girl is over the reading of her letter, and what a foolish business is the writing of love-letters!" mused the Professor, not to-day in his happiest, most contented mood. The spring made him feel old, and he yearned to feel young. It was not so very long since he had seen his fortieth birthday. He was really in his prime; yet a gulf seemed to separate him from that joyous girl in the copse.

Then his thoughts went back to another spring day —many and many a year ago—a day on which he had felt buoyant and youthful as Marguerite herself. The hopes that had made him in love with life then, the rapturous looking forward, the ineffable trust, these were dead as last year's leaves. No sun could resuscitate them. Would this be her fate also; such fond illusion, such painful awakening to the truth?

Had the heart prophecies of the early days come true he should not now be sitting there, a lonely, un-

loved, loveless man, a solitary unit in the great human family; an individuality without close-knit ties and fireside sympathies. Family life would have been his, perhaps the clinging love of children, the unspeakable looking-forward of fatherhood.

But why spend time in thinking of these things? He enjoyed the respect of his townsfolk, an honourable position, the friendship of estimable men and women, a considerable amount of well-being, immunity from care. Was not that a portion far above his deserts; enviable in the eyes of many?

"But this little girl is past all bearing with," he said to himself at last; and springing from his feet, still unwilling to break upon her solitude, he repeated: "Marguerites, les marguerites!"

Growing more impatient, and, if the truth must be confessed, just a trifle out of temper, he again shouted her name, and again without success. Really he could not help it, he must disturb her now; the first spring holiday of the year was half wasted already. Collecting the scattered objects, and carrying his armful as best he could, dropping now her hat, now the bunch of flowers, now the basket, and stooping to pick each up with a little exclamation of annoyance, after several halts, he reached Marguerite's shady covert.

But on the threshold of the little glade, set round with hazel-trees and eglantine, he drew back in astonishment. Instead of springing forward to meet him, blushing, tearful with joy, Marguerite lay on the ground in a

passion of grief, her face buried in her hands, sobs choking her utterance, whilst scattered to the winds, tossed hither and thither, were the several sheets of that eagerly longed-for, rapturously-received ship-letter.

The conviction immediately flashed across the Professor's mind. His playful prediction was then verified. Marguerite's dream-lover had played her false!

He threw down his burdens, and was at her side in a moment.

"Come," he said, very kindly, but unable, for the life of him, to regard the matter in a tragic light, "come. Has our little Marguerite no moral courage? Is she a child, to break her heart over a lost toy?"

Her first impulse was to rise, and hide the scattered sheets from his sight, to keep her terrible secret; but a sense of overweening desolation, an unutterable craving for sympathy, got the better of timidity and reserve. And Monsieur Vincent had ever been her kindest friend. She felt sure that he would respect her confidences.

Withdrawing one hand from her burning, tear-wet eyes, she pointed to the papers.

"Read, read!" she murmured, still weeping bitterly.

Now, if there was one task above all others wearisome to the poor Professor, it was the reading of closely-written manuscript. His eyesight had been much tried, and was no longer so good as it might be. He felt daily and hourly the necessity of economising that most precious possession. The young sailor's letter consisted of three sheets of note-paper, of extra size;

the small, crabbed writing covered each page. To peruse such an epistle from beginning to end would occupy at least half an hour—another precious half-hour of his fast-waning holiday! Marguerite had ever interested him. But he was a hard-worked man, a lover of the country, condemned to sedentary occupations. Even for Marguerite's sake he did not feel inclined to sacrifice his ten miles' walk.

"I will read your letter another time, this very evening," he replied, putting the sheets together. "You and I, Marguerite, do not get a holiday every day. Let us enjoy it when we can, in spite of little rebuffs."

"Read, read!" she cried, more passionately than before. "I shall never enjoy anything again. My life is spoiled; my heart broken."

"That is surely going too far, whatever may have happened. Come, my child, listen to a reasonable word. Be guided. Let us talk as we continue our stroll."

"Read, if you care for me at all; do read what Pierre has written," she pleaded in a desperate voice.

In order to soothe her, he took out his spectacles and glanced at one page after another. Judged from a man's standpoint, from the standpoint of older and more experienced women also, the young sailor's conduct was hardly to be called blameworthy.

He wrote in a straightforward, manly, respectful strain. The indefinite engagement had now gone on for many years, he said, and might go on for many more. Meantime, he saw no prospect of revisiting home;

none whatever of promotion, which, in his case, meant the possibility of marriage. He had long felt it a duty first to her, then to himself, to break off a compact entered upon almost in childhood. His life was that of a rover; even if they knew each other well and the fondest attachment existed between them, he had no right to bind her to such a destiny. His cousin Marguerite was then free. Heaven grant that she might be loved and happy!

Such was the substance of the letter, gathered by the impatient Professor in about five minutes; Marguerite watching his face as he read. Without a word he very coolly folded the sheets, replaced them in their envelope, and handed it to her.

"Oh! is it not heartless, cowardly, cruel? If only I were a man and could meet him in duel!" she said. "'Marguerite,' he begins, 'dear, my very dear Marguerite.' How happy I was when I began to read, never dreaming of what would follow! And now he loves somebody else—I am sure of it—he would not have cast me off else; and I am all alone in the world. I belong to nobody."

That childish outburst melted the Professor at last. He forgot his contemplated walk; his impatience, even touch of ill-temper, vanished in a moment. Carried away by a sudden impulse, bent only on comforting his favourite, wholly disconcerted by the pathos of those large, beautiful eyes, he now raised the weeping girl and kissed her on the brow.

"Nay," he said, "you belong to your friends who love you, Marguerite. You belong to me!"

No sooner was the deed done, those fond, foolish words uttered, than the Professor realised his dilemma. He had gone too far to draw back. The lover-like kiss, the still more lover-like speech, were irrevocable. Not only was his half-holiday forfeited, but something far more serious, his liberty.

But instead of being overcome by this conviction, however, he found himself growing bolder and bolder. It all became clear to him, his interest in the under-teacher, his readiness to afford her little pleasures, the alacrity with which he had followed her this afternoon. He owned now that only Pierre's image, Pierre's ship-letter had prevented him from speaking out before. Pierre was a phantom lover; but he loved her indeed.

"You cannot care for me as he did—as I thought he did," sighed Marguerite. "I am a mere child in your eyes. You kissed me just now because I seem a child to you."

"Listen, Marguerite," he said. "If you will dry your eyes and come with me, I will tell you my own story —much such a story as yours. You will understand then that I do not regard you as the little Marguerite of old. I, too, belong to nobody. Why should we not belong to each other?"

And at last the Professor did set off for his holiday walk; but Marguerite with him, Marguerite's little hand within his arm, as they threaded the country lanes;

he telling her of his early life, and the disappointment that had clouded it. She forgot her own sorrows in sympathising with his; she was drawn from a world of unrealities to facts; from the dream-love beyond the sea to the true, sturdy friend at hand. A very long walk it was; and many a halt they made, now listening to the thrush and the blackcap, now gathering wild flowers and cowslips. He felt the yearned-for sense of youthfulness come back; she was conscious of a newer, better wisdom since yesterday. That spring holiday, spoiled as they first thought for both, was to be the beginning of the true spring-tide of life, the first awakening to a pure, strong, and tender love!

THE ROSE-WEAVERS.

THE ROSE-WEAVERS.

A STORY IN FOUR CHAPTERS.

CHAPTER I.

THE MEETING.

It was the time of roses; roses in our homely England; roses in classic Italy; roses in lands ice-bound throughout half the year; roses everywhere!

This brief season the rose has made her own, is especially rapturous to inhabitants of the cold North, condemned, like the twin gods of old, to spend half their lives in the upper heaven, and the other half in Pluto's dark and dread domain. Certainly they enjoy a foretaste alike of those islands of the blest, destined for the heroic and the virtuous, and of that gloomy under-world, wherein the wicked expiate their crimes. And magical the transition in both cases from one to another! But yesterday winter covered the world with its icy mantle, and all Nature seemed dead. To-day, quiet rivers flow through pastures emerald green; on the glittering blue sea are seen a hundred sails; all the country folks are busy in the hay-fields; whilst roses have burst into bloom everywhere, making the air heavy with perfume.

In the royal garden of a northern island, maidens were busily weaving roses one midsummer day. They sat scattered in groups about the place, and made a pretty picture, some on the green sward beside the miniature lake, others occupying steps of the marble terrace; others again had chosen shady nooks and corners, where, bare-headed, they sedulously plied their task. Here and there stood baskets filled with cut roses, and as soon as one was empty, it was immediately replaced by the assistant gardeners. These roses, be it remarked, had just come carefully packed from the neighbouring Continent; not a single flower could be spared from the King's gardens just now.

Right merrily the girls went on with their bewitching work. They sang, they laughed, they chatted as unconcernedly as if the whole place belonged to them, which indeed it did for that day. Save for upholsterers and decorators, the charming little summer Palace was deserted. The director of the forthcoming ceremonies was good-nature itself, and well pleased to see folks gay, so long as they put their shoulders to the wheel.

In order that to-morrow's fête should prove a success, it was necessary that all under his direction should do this with a vengeance. Girls naturally look their prettiest when thus occupied. Weaving roses is a fairy task, and in light summer dresses, with their fair hair shining in the sun, their cheeks aglow with pleasure, these northern maidens might well challenge criticism. Most of them were daughters of the hardy fishermen

of the island, descendants of the sea-kings of old; but their very rusticity lent an added charm. Rich and poor, gentle and simple, to-day consorted together.

There was one girl whom any sudden intruder must at the first glance have singled out as the Queen. She was tall and fair, with all the grace of a Teutonic maiden, and much more besides. A certain air of distinction marked her, too, from the rest, and although gay and animated as any, her face betokened intellect and character quite out of the ordinary way. It was evident that whilst throwing heart and soul into her work, her playful moods alternated with deep seriousness. As zealous a rose-weaver as any, she yet seemed absent from time to time; her thoughts were evidently elsewhere.

Her companion was one of those naïve, artless, seventeen-year-old maidens, fresh from school, and as far as earnestness and insight are concerned, she might have been fresh from the cradle. In making garlands, as in more weighty undertakings, there must be a head to direct, and the younger and less capable girls had been thus told off to help their elders. The stately Ermengarde was clever enough and resolute enough to have directed far more important affairs than a Court ceremonial. Bertha, by her side, was a giggling little thing, with only will enough to do the simplest thing she was bidden.

A few minutes before, she had giggled when the head gardener came up to chat for two minutes with

Ermengarde; she now began to titter afresh as she saw some one else approaching, this time a stranger. There was a constant going to and fro of functionaries, most of whom found time to interchange a word or two with Ermengarde, the brilliant, beautiful daughter of the head forester.

The intruder this time was a stranger, and naturally addressed himself to the most striking girl he caught sight of, as he descended the marble steps leading to the garden.

He was a sunburnt, bearded, handsome fellow, who looked more like a soldier or sea-faring man than a civilian, much less an official of a fastidious little Court. His dress, too, had a careless, rustic look, and his hands showed signs of exposure to all weathers. There was, however, a certain winningness, a bonhomie and candour about him, that made up for these drawbacks; a certain ease, too, betokening the educated gentleman.

"Pardon me, Fräulein," he said, dropping bare-headed into a seat beside the two girls. "Allow me to repose myself an instant. Here is my card: Adolf Christian Neumann, King's-Messenger. I have just ridden from the harbour on a special errand, and had at the same time a sly hint to see how things were getting on. I only hope this King of yours may prove worth all these roses!"

"Was any King that ever lived worth so much?" asked Ermengarde, with more of sorrow than scorn in her beautiful smile.

The young man smiled also, and looked at the speaker penetratingly and with deep and growing admiration. What a glorious creature! he was evidently thinking to himself. This tall, stately, golden-haired girl possessed natural, inborn dignity, and unlike these fisher-maidens, her companions, had seen more of the world than her own little island. The head forester's daughter was, indeed, an accomplished and well-bred lady.

"You are no courtier, then?" he said, evidently provoked, yet fascinated by her outspokenness. "Your heart is evidently not in your work."

"Whose heart can ever be in such work as this?" she replied. "We flatter Kings, whilst all the time we either hate or despise them."

"This is a free country," the stranger put in. "Why not wear black to-morrow when your King comes, thus protesting in your own person against his iniquities?"

Ermengarde now laughed merrily. The incongruousness of the image thus suggested, appealed to her sense of humour. She wondered what all the loyal islanders would make of it—the head forester's daughter in black when every other maiden had put on white and rose garlands!

"I assure you," she answered, "nothing would please me better had I no one but myself to consider. But I am the head forester's daughter. In all social observances I am tied hand and foot."

"Tell me," the young man went on, settling himself comfortably in the rustic seat, evidently determined to

talk as long as he could get her to listen to him; "what are these vilenesses, these desperate sins of your especial monarch, that make you long to cut off all Kings' heads?"

"Nay, history wants no more such martyrs," the girl said; "but since Kings have ceased to be lawgivers, what good purpose do they serve? And they get too much flattery. They live as completely shut out from the real life of the people as if they inhabited the planet Jupiter."

His mood changed from gay to grave.

"These roses, then, are a mere show of loyalty; the festive appearance this island puts on in honour of the Royal visit, means—nothing?"

"What should it mean?" Ermengarde cried again, with a scornful smile. "We are not living in the childhood of history. Even the rude fisher-folk now think for themselves. They know well enough that it is the laws that shield them from harm, not the favour of a King."

"But since these unfortunate beings, Kings, do exist," he went on, with returning sportiveness and good humour, "what would you have them do? How should they behave so as to deserve a real welcome from the people?"

"We are all God's people, Kings must first remember that," was the girl's spirited reply. "Then they should reflect that the honours heaped upon them are one and all unearned, and in most cases undeserved."

"On my word," retorted the other, "to judge from you, this little island must be a very hotbed of sedition."

"By no means. These islanders have enough to do

to get bread for their children. They but bide their time. The world will be wiser one day," said the young lady with a toss of her head. Then, as if a sudden thought struck her, she turned round quickly: "One might suppose you were a King yourself, from the lazy way in which you sit looking on, whilst others toil and moil. Please help me to carry these garlands indoors."

The young King's-Messenger jumped from his seat flushed with pleasure, and right heartily laid his hand to the task. Each holding a handle of the basket, they ascended the marble steps, a superb pair to behold; he so winsome and manly, she so graceful and fair! They chatted gaily as they passed down a cool corridor, Ermengarde leading the way.

"Fräulein," he said shyly, when they had deposited their burden, "you seem to be in authority here. Could you order me something to eat and drink? Then I must mount horse and be off."

She conducted him to a small room near the kitchen set apart for the head forester's especial use, and opening a cupboard brought out such homely fare as the island afforded—rye-bread, cheese, whortleberry jam, and light beer.

"I offer you the best I have," she said coolly, "but if you had addressed yourself in the first instance to the house-steward, you would fare better."

"This is excellent; indeed, I desire nothing better," he replied, sitting down with capital appetite.

"When you have done, please close the door. I

must go back to my task," added Ermengarde, but under one pretext and another he induced her to stay, making his meal as quickly as possible. Then he rose, hat in hand, prepared to take leave.

"I have one more favour to ask before I go," he said. "I return in the King's train to-morrow. You will honour me with your hand in the dance, will you not?"

"Certainly."

"Certainly, certainly," he exclaimed, with petulant impatience. "There will be numerous claimants for the privilege. I must have something definite—a promise."

What trifling! her face said, but the thought was not put into words; so winning the stranger's manner, so sympathetic his voice, look, and speech, she could but humour him. And she was a woman after all. In spite of the thoughtfulness and nobility of her character, a character in which there was not a vestige of coquettishness, she recognised his adoring admiration, and the recognition brought joy.

CHAPTER II.

THE SURPRISE.

This little island of the northern sea had been so far ill-used of fortune; hitherto it could boast of no Royal visit. King after King of the dynasty that sways these realms was crowned and buried; rumours of grand doings reached the fisher-folks from time to time; brilliant Court ceremonials, christenings, bridals, burials. A more

stay-at-home folk than these islanders, except, perhaps, their neighbours, the Lapps, hardly existed. They heard of pageants without beholding any. Very rarely, and only on matters of urgent business, they crossed the sea that divided them from the Continent.

Now at last they were to have a pageant of their own; not, perhaps, to be compared to celebrations in the capital, but a great affair for all that. The King was coming!

The good islanders were not more exuberantly loyal than the rest of the workaday world. They were sorely weighed down with taxation. It was as much as they could do to get a frugal living. Sentiment had no hold upon this sturdy, matter-of-fact race. Yet that piece of news, the King was coming, sufficed to awaken universal enthusiasm. The island was about to keep holiday from end to end. From the remotest corners, all who were old enough to toddle and not too old to creep along with the aid of a stick, were flocking to the spectacle.

Capital the island could not be said to possess, nor was the so-called Royal Palace much more than a hunting-lodge or summer pavilion. There was therefore no possibility of carrying out anything to be called a programme indoors, and, as the weather was magnificent, alike the banquet and the ball were to take place in the open air. This arrangement admirably suited the general taste and convenience, for whilst the little Palace could hardly have held a hundred and fifty guests, the entire population of the island would find more than breathing-room in the park outside. A fine stretch of sward was

enclosed for the dancers, and a tent erected for the Royal banquet. Beyond these precincts, all could disport themselves as they pleased. Rows of booths, such as we see at fairs, were to be supplied with refreshments, served to all at the Royal expense. Truth to tell, this visit was a kind of apology on the part of a newly-crowned King for a series of ancestral neglects. The times, too, were critical. It was not a moment when rulers, whether of small States or large, could afford to have sulky subjects.

There were many reasons why Ermengarde, the head forester's daughter, should take a leading part in the day's proceedings. She was the best educated girl of the island, to begin with. She had seen something of life and manners in the great world beyond sea. She would know exactly what to do and say when leading her rose-garlanded maidens to welcome the King. A procession of girls dressed in white and bearing flowers was to await the Royal visitor on the landing-place, and it was Ermengarde's duty to offer a bouquet and make a little speech.

"What a mockery, what mere child's play, it all is!" she said, as she glanced at her white dress and wreath before putting them on. "If some hero were to be welcomed to-day, one who had risked his life for his country, or even saved the lives of half-a-dozen of his fellows, as many of our poor fishermen have done, then no one would prepare for this festival more enthusiastically than myself. But this King! He may wish to do

good. He may be free from the vices of his forerunners. What is he as yet, but a mere name to us?"

She twice adjusted the wreath of crimson roses to her fair head, and twice removed it.

"And no one is bold enough to tell them the truth. Kings live and die without hearing the truth. Could I speak to this one as I did to his messenger yesterday, open my heart to him, speak out as one rational, thinking being is bound to speak out to another, then his visit might not be made in vain."

It must not be supposed that Ermengarde was a young lady imbued with revolutionary doctrines, or that she was wanting in accurate notions of history. She did not wish to see her island handed over to conspirators against the existing order of things; much less was she of opinion that to do away with Royalty would be to bring about a social millennium. But, young as she was, she had witnessed the horrors of civil war; she realised the havoc made in family life by military conscription; she knew that this long-suffering race of islanders were bowed down by the weight of taxation; and could the most ardent Royalist, the most impartial student of history, aver that dynastic ambition and intrigue had nothing to do with such afflictions?

This little northern kingdom was far from being ideally governed. Even now a Royal yea and nay were far too puissant. However, the King was coming; he must be welcomed. So at last, and with some reluctance, Ermengarde put on her white dress and wreath

of crimson roses. A smile rose to her lips as she thought of that genial, impetuous stranger; his manner, she hardly knew why, had pleased her greatly. He was so frank, so generous and manly, and evidently, like herself, had seen something of men and manners on the great Continent. That promised dance with him would be a relief to the stiff ceremonial of the evening.

"Ermengarde, Ermengarde!"

A dozen girlish voices now called her name, for it was time to go. No prettier sight could be imagined than these blonde maidens as they trooped along in their white muslin dresses—silk and satin were unknown on the island, and jewels almost equally so. Few wore other ornaments but roses in their hair and on their bosom. The leader was as simply dressed as any; her pre-eminence—and it was marked enough—consisted in that inborn grace, that stately yet spirited beauty that would have marked her out among a far more brilliant fellowship.

The girls had not taken their place on the terrace a minute too soon. Hardly were they drawn up in proper order when the distant huzzas of the crowd outside the Palace gates, the firing of a salute in the harbour, the clatter of hoofs, and the braying of trumpets announced the Royal cavalcade. There was a general titter and trembling amongst the girls; they craned their necks in order to obtain a first glimpse; they waved their handkerchiefs; they grew crimson and breathless with excitement. Only Ermengarde retained self-posses-

sion. She had her bouquet and little speech in readiness; her curiosity to behold the face of a King was not inordinate, and, it must be added, she could not help wondering all the time if her acquaintance of yesterday was really there.

The event so eagerly longed for was come and gone in a moment. A group of horsemen wearing brilliant uniforms dashed up; one, a little in advance of the others, with a broad ribbon across his breast, was the first to dismount, receiving homage from all sides. Ermengarde's flowers and words of welcome were graciously acknowledged, a few courtesies exchanged, a final huzza raised by the crowd, then the glittering uniforms, the stars and decorations disappeared within the Palace walls.

"What a noble presence!" cried one girl.

"What an engaging smile!" said the second.

"How handsome!" exclaimed a third.

Only the disconcerted Ermengarde had no word at command. In the person of the King she had recognised her new friend of yesterday!

CHAPTER III.

THE DANCE.

A FAIRY-LIKE scene was the open-air dance. Splendour could not be conjured up on this island. No wand could transform the flowery little Eden into the semblance of a Court. But the coloured lanterns hanging from the

trees, the rose-garlands adorning the Royal tent, the white dresses of the maidens, the brilliant uniforms of the men, worked wonderful transformation. To the minds of the islanders, who had flocked together in a body to greet their King, the spectacle was enchanting, past belief.

If pomp was not to be transplanted to this sea-girt domain, no more was ceremony. The King, being as yet a bachelor, had brought no ladies in his train. To the naïve fisher-folk it seemed the most natural thing in the world that he should dance with Ermengarde. The head forester was one of the leading personages of the island, and his daughter the fairest and most accomplished girl it could boast of. A burst of applause rose from the assembled crowd as the right royal-looking pair now stepped forth. If kingly the mien of this young man, but lately and unexpectedly called from a sailor's life to wear a crown, queenly also the tall, stately, golden-haired maiden now standing by his side.

Ermengarde had never looked more beautiful. An amount of hauteur, half-playful, half-serious, lent piquancy to her spirited loveliness. She was affronted with the King for the blunder into which he had entrapped her. She was half-inclined to accuse him of a frivolity of character, unsuspected in her guest of the day before.

"You see I am here to redeem my promise," he said, smiling. "I trust you are not displeased to find in me an old acquaintance?"

"Nay," said Ermengarde. "How can I help being displeased? I have lost one who might have been my friend."

"Can a King have no friends, then?" he asked, colouring with vexation, perplexed as well as bewitched by this island beauty. "You will make me wish that I could maintain yesterday's incognito for ever."

Ermengarde slightly blushed. She knew well enough that any breach of etiquette would be more than forgiven just now; all the more, she was determined not to commit any.

"Sire——" she began, intending to apologise for the freedom of the day before, and at the same time to convey a covert reproach.

He stopped her gaily and joyously.

"No ceremonies, no titles to-night, I entreat—I command. For this once, and for you, I am the King's-Messenger. Indeed I must have it so."

"Then," said Ermengarde brightly, "to the King's-Messenger I may openly say what is in my mind. He should not have come here under a false pretence. I might have compromised others besides myself."

The candid brow clouded over; the genial voice had a tone of bitterness in it as he replied:

"You have evidently a poor idea of human nature. Should I stoop to such meanness?"

"Pardon, a thousand times, I ask pardon," Ermengarde said, greatly vexed at the misinterpretation put upon her words. "I but meant to say that I might have given a wholly wrong impression of these good

fisher-folk—see how loyal they are!" She smiled gaily, and added: "I believe I am the only malcontent in this part of your Majesty's dominions."

"You are not speaking to the King, remember," he replied. "But let me explain why I made that sudden raid upon you yesterday. You know my story. Who seemed less likely, a year ago, to inherit a crown than myself? One fine morning, I, the sailor Prince, am torn away from my free, careless life, and saluted with the title of King. That of Pope, Prime Minister, or Crown Lawyer would have been equally appropriate!"

"Unfortunately, a crown is not awarded as a premium upon capacity. Had it been put up for competitive examination, you might have escaped," smiled Ermengarde.

"Well, perhaps, for me had it been so," he said, smiling also. Then he went on in a graver tone: "My tastes have ever been in quite other lines. I have always valued my freedom above everything; freedom to roam the world, to lead the life of an explorer, and" —here he looked at her meaningly—"to settle down in a home of my own choosing when fancy willed. I do not pretend to say that my changed prospects are altogether displeasing to me now. Who can help being influenced by his surroundings? I shall, I daresay, gradually grow into a wholly altered being."

"Yes," Ermengarde answered, slowly and sadly. "If ever you visit this island again you will certainly not dance with the head forester's daughter. You will not wish your subjects to forget that you are King then."

There was so much of simple, yet suggestive truth in these words, that for a moment the young man's gaiety vanished. Joyous music filled the little forest world, Ermengarde, in all her beauty, stood beside him, his partner in the dance, yet he was grave and pensive.

"You are right," he said. "I feel that not only my youth, but my nature must be sacrificed to my greatness, that slowly, yet surely and irrevocably, I shall become a stranger to my former self. Here, for a last brief moment, I snatch a breath of liberty. But it was something more than a mere wild caprice that made me steal a march on my courtiers yesterday." He glanced round and added in an undertone: "Fame had reached me of the head forester's daughter. I wanted to judge for myself if these islanders had boasted too much of their Queen."

A deep blush dyed Ermengarde's cheeks, and once more that remonstrative—"Sire"—rose to her lips.

"Remember our compact," he said. "Surely no hard one to keep for so brief a period. I may not be unhappier than the ordinary run of mortals; I may succeed in stifling the generous impulses of my youth; but no moment of the future can rival this. Do not rob me of what, once lost, can never be replaced."

There was not a vestige of coquetry in Ermengarde's disposition, but she glowed as she listened to these flattering words.

All her old liking for the frank, genial King's-Messenger had come back. There was the feeling of youth,

too, which drew them together, the sense of comradeship, sympathy—call it what we will—that leads one human being to open his heart to another.

"You must not dance with me any more, for all that," she said. "You are the King to others, if only his Messenger to me."

"And the last-named personage will not quit this island without bidding you farewell," he answered. "Expect me at the head forester's house before I go."

He led her to a seat, and disappeared amid the crowd of dancers.

Half-a-dozen artless girls were made proud and happy by the Royal invitation to dance. Then the signal was given for the banquet. The King and his courtiers disappeared, and all too quickly for the delighted multitude, alike dance and banquet came to an end.

CHAPTER IV.

AT THE HEAD FORESTER'S.

THE head forester's house was one of the handsomest in the island. It stood by the road-side, on the border of the vast forest almost covering the sea-girt kingdom. Though solitary, the site was full of charm in summer time. Golden the light, penetrating the lofty pine trees; unbroken, save for the notes of birds, the silence that brooded everywhere; fragrant with a thousand flowers, the breezes stirring the branches. Here and there, bits of pasture or cornland intersected

the wood, and meadow and field were carpeted with flowers. Bright-hued butterflies flitted in the sunshine. Sad to reflect that this delicious summer was almost as short-lived as they! From October to April the country lay wrapped in snow; often so intense the frost that all communication with the outer world would be cut off for weeks.

Although Ermengarde had been educated in a brilliant city of the Continent, she clung to her island home. These winters had as yet no terrors for her. Acquaintances contrived to meet at each other's houses by means of the sledge. In her widowed father she had a sympathetic companion. Then there were her tastes and duties: she was not only mistress of the head forester's house, but a guardian angel to the poor; and last, but not least, a passionate musician and devotee of Schiller and Goethe. The wintry hours passed all too quickly.

And like all high-spirited girls, she could but regard this quiet, uneventful existence as an interlude, a preface to what should be life indeed. She hearkened as yet for the unriddling of the sphinx.

On the second morning after that forest dance, what was her astonishment to see the King ride up? He had promised to come, it is true, but a few hours before her father had been summoned to meet him in another part of the island. She supposed him to be miles away. She was watering her flowers, not wholly with unconcern, yet not without some fluttering of the heart as

she recalled the incidents of the last few days, when a couple of horsemen stopped at the gate, the foremost threw the reins to the other, and she recognised him at once.

"Pardon me, Fräulein," he said, affecting an easy tone in the hearing of the attendant, "I parted company with your respected father an hour ago, and he gave me leave to call here and ask for some refreshment. The rest of my party are regaling at the little restaurant by the shore. Have I your permission to enter?"

Ermengarde turned from red to pale. She saw through the device. He had hit upon this expedient for bidding her farewell.

She bowed low and tried to get out a word of welcome, but speech stayed on her trembling lips. It was as if she were under a spell.

The little household was busy in the hayfield. She suddenly remembered that there was no one to wait upon her Royal guest but herself. As she had done two days before, she now began to set before him the best the larder afforded.

"Once more pardon me," he said, "I have not indeed come merely to eat and drink, although a morsel of bread and a glass of water will be acceptable. But I really came because I had something to say to you."

He looked at her penetratingly, as if fain to read her inmost thoughts.

"Tell me," he said, are you happy here? This island, so remote, so cut off from the world, is surely no sphere for you."

"I have my father," was the proud yet faltering reply, "and many friends, besides home duties."

"I have been plotting and making plans on your behalf," he went on with an affectation of gaiety; she could see all the time that he was anxious and ill at ease. "And I hinted my views to the head forester just now. He is more ambitious for you than you are for yourself. With his full consent would you quit this island for a time?"

Ermengarde looked bewildered and irresponsive. He continued: "In my mother, you would find a sure friend and protector. Your father could have no misgivings about your welfare. Say then that you will at least make the experiment; that you will grace our Court if only for a year."

The prospect thus hinted at was dazzling indeed. A position at Court, the patronage of the Queen-mother; social horizons widening with every year, what else should these things mean but a future to satisfy any woman's aspirations? The King's good faith and single-mindedness were beyond doubt. No suspicion of evil intent could attach itself to his outspoken, manly nature.

"You would be free to go or stay as you pleased," he urged. "As one of the ladies attached to my mother's household, you would be entirely independent. You can have no plausible objection to make."

But the look of doubt in Ermengarde's face had given way to positive negation. The more persuasive he became, the further she drew back.

"Are such friendships as ours made every day?" he said at last. "At least, let me have the privilege of seeing you from time to time."

"My friend was the King's-Messenger, not the King," was the sad reply. "To him the head forester's daughter must henceforth remain a stranger."

"What is my position that it should thus repel you?" he said. "I remain myself. Yet you are right. This crown, this hateful crown, divides us. I am no longer free to love!"

She had divined his secret already, and had he not her own too? All her courage vanished on a sudden. She sat as one stricken by evil fortune.

"We were drawn to each other from the first," he went on, now using the passionate language of an avowed lover, speaking in low, quick undertones. "Oh, Ermengarde, instead of enticing you from your island, could I but share it with you, could I un-king myself for your sake!"

Then the honest eyes filled with tears, the frank, naturally joyous voice broke down. He was utterly unmanned, and the sight of his agitation helped to restore her calm. She felt bound to make a great effort in order to regain self-mastery.

"Let us not think of ourselves," she murmured. "You are called to play a great part. You will have no time for vain regrets, and I"—checking her tears, she went on—"I will try to forget the King's-Messenger, and from a distance follow the King's career. If noble, if worthy of him, I shall be consoled."

"Can any human being live nobly without happiness?" he answered, resenting alike his good and evil fortune, feeling all his words alike empty of meaning. It was sweet to sit thus by her side listening, but the future stretched before him bare and colourless. His joy was buried in this little island. And he dared no longer broach the subject of her departure. They loved each other, and in their case love could only mean separation.

"Self-sought happiness is not always the best," she said gently. "You, least of all, can afford to live for yourself."

"I am young. It is hard to learn such lessons so soon," he replied, almost boyishly resentful and despondent.

The glory of summer lay round the earth. They were in the summer of life, yet a weight of despair lay on their young hearts.

"Bid me farewell and go away," Ermengarde said, feeling unable to bear this tension of feeling any longer. "We can do each other no good."

She had hitherto sought to soothe and inspirit him; but now alike her helplessness and love had spoken. He sprang to her side, moved by a desperate decision.

"You love me!" he whispered. "Then away with this crown! Be another's this uncoveted kingdom, for I am not entirely a slave. I can abdicate. Say the word, and I will be nothing else—yours, yours only."

She shook her head, smiling through her tears.

"But it can, it shall be," he added. "What do I care for men's scorn or for the good opinion of the great? Should not a man choose for himself where his whole happiness is concerned? Kings have abdicated before now. A few days' gossip, and the world will forget my existence."

These wild words, wrung in all sincerity from the depth of his passion, only moved Ermengarde so far. She was growing more and more sorry for him and for herself. He might draw a bright picture of the future, might apparently sweep away all obstacles and impossibilities; might insist that things were to be as his fancy painted them. The reality was present to her—hard, cruel, and implacable. One moment was theirs only. To-day they were lovers, drawn as near to each other as human beings can well be by virtue of sympathy and affection. To-morrow they should be less than strangers.

"Go," she said; "we have both been dreaming. Let us dream no more!"

Just then the clatter of hoofs was heard, and a party of horsemen rode up.

"That is surely my father hastening back to take leave of you. He must not be made unhappy too. Be good, be happy, my comrade, my King. Ermengarde's allegiance shall never fail you."

She was about to raise his hand loyally to her lips, but he bent forward, for a moment held her in his arms, and kissed her, lover-like, on the brow. When

the head forester entered, both were collected, and apparently cheerful. The bitterness of parting was over.

EPILOGUE.

That gallant young King never revisited the little island of the rose-weavers. He wedded, for diplomatic reasons, a neighbouring Princess, and in time grew stout, careworn, and prosaic.

Poetry and romance with Kings, as with ordinary beings, have their season. We cannot be ever young, and ever in love!

One day, in commemoration of a peace, a splendid pageant took place in the capital. The Sovereign, as he drove carelessly through the gaily-decorated streets, was struck by a little group in a balcony.

It was a beautiful woman, surrounded by her children, three little girls, each a copy of their mother. By her side stood a stalwart, sunburnt, elderly man, whose occupation was evidently of a rural nature.

"Who is that lady?" asked the Sovereign, as the carriage passed at a snail's pace under the window.

"That lady, your Majesty," was the reply, "is the daughter of your Majesty's head forester."

"I remember quite well, said the King quickly, aroused from his lethargic mood, "Berg, of the Island Klô."

"Exactly, your Majesty."

"And who is her husband?"

"A German professor, your Majesty, whose name I don't remember."

The King glanced once at the occupants of the balcony and then sank into a reverie. Every incident of that island visit now came back to him, clearly as if of yesterday. And looking back on the intervening years, he wished that he had done as he said, abdicated for the sake of the beautiful Ermengarde, and let love be lord of all. "Yes, life can be dull, unsatisfactory, hardly worth living for, even to a King," he thought. "I was forced into a marriage against my will. What is a man good for after that?"

"I don't think much of your King, mamma!" cried the eldest girl, the little thirteen-year-old Ermengarde, to her mother. "You said he was so bright and handsome. He looks half asleep, and as if he took no interest in anything."

"And he saw you, mamma," said the second child. "He ought to have stopped and spoken to you, since he knew you on your island."

Thus the children prattled on, and Ermengarde let them say what they would. She had never been dissatisfied with her lot, and had never given way to vain retrospection. But, like her lover, she forgot nothing. Ofttimes in her dreaming hours she was the rose-weaver talking gaily to the King's-Messenger. Her husband was worthy of her; she adored her children; but romance for her had ended on a certain summer day, fifteen years before.

CRESSY'S PALADIN.

CRESSY'S PALADIN.

It was midnight in suburban London. A young man, stalwart, well-dressed, swinging his stick and whistling gaily as he went, quitted the high road for a lonely lane that led to old Hornsey Church.

Harry Leffield did not know what fear meant; but these semi-rural by-ways are the haunts of tramps and of gentry less scrupulous. On this account, he studiously kept the middle of the road, held himself erect, and whistled carelessly. He carried neither money nor valuables, but it was as well to be on one's guard, and to let loafers know that he was not their man.

He had just crossed a stile, and was about to strike across a field-path to his destination, when he was suddenly arrested, but by no miscreant hand. The light, timid fingers of a woman now touched his arm, and a girl's gentle voice murmured piteously—

"Give me food and shelter."

Young Leffield started. He was an easy-going fellow, far from bent on evil just then, but not given to self-questioning.

His first impulse was to fumble for a sixpence. He could not see the petitioner's face; the sweetness

of her voice caused him to hesitate. Here was no common pleader of the streets, no tale whispered in men's ears every day.

The latchkey too, jingling against his loose coin, perilously reminded him that he was his own master. His landlady, and the little maid-of-all-work, would now be fast asleep at the top of the house. His fellow-lodger and comrade happened to be away. Why should he not indulge in an adventure, and at the same time commit a charitable act? No one need be the wiser.

"I live in lodgings, my girl," he said. "If you return with me not a soul must know it—you understand."

"Have you bread there?" asked the wanderer, anxiously, and without heeding his own question. "I have tasted no food since morning."

"Bread, and meat, and wine," the young man retorted, growing reckless and excited. "And money too."

"Is it far off? Your lodging, I mean," again she asked, in a voice faint with weariness and exhaustion.

"You see yonder lamp? We turn the corner and there we are." They trudged on, the worn-out girl doing her best to keep pace with her athletic companion. The sparsely scattered lamps ended with the turning. A few paces more and he stopped before a little garden in which was one of those imitations of a country cottage still found in certain suburbs. The

tiny house stood alone and possessed shrubbery, flower-plot, and vegetable garden.

"Do not let us talk till we get inside," he whispered, putting the key to the lock. Then they entered on tip-toe. All was silence; but a feeble jet of gas partially lighted up the entrance hall. Closing the door, he lighted the gas-stove, then a lamp, and rubbed his hands gleefully.

It was a cheerful little room, curtained, carpeted, furnished with bookshelves and piano. Adjoining was the young clerk's bed-chamber, that, too, neat and comfortable; the two forming cosy bachelor's quarters of the more modest kind.

"Come," he said, rubbing his hands excitedly. "This begins to look like comfort, doesn't it? Take off your bonnet whilst I get out supper. But, heavens alive! Where on earth did that beast come from?"

He now, for the first time, noticed a battered-looking, ill-favoured, one-eyed cur, that had lovingly dogged the girl's footsteps, and now, as if anxious to hide himself, crouched down by her chair.

Harry Leffield was, generally speaking, a lover of dogs and good-natured to most living creatures, but here was a wholly objectionable intruder. Up went the sash in a moment. The unwelcome visitor would have been straightway cast out but for his young mistress's interposition.

"He is mine. I love him. I cannot stay without him," she cried in low pleading tones. "And he is

gentle as a lamb, and famished too. For pity's sake, give him a bone."

"If you can answer for his good behaviour, he may stay and eat his fill too," was the reply. "I like dogs well enough in their place. How came you by the poor brute? An uglier one I never set eyes on."

"I will tell you afterwards. Please feed Pet. I can wait."

"Pet, you call him," the young man laughed derisively. "But how came he to lose his eye?"

Cressy, that was the girl's name, threw her arms round the dog's neck and covered him with kisses.

"That is why I am wandering about to-night starved and homeless," she replied, her voice gathering force as she went on. "I left the Home, the Orphanage in which I was brought up, a few weeks ago for a situation in London. It was with a lady who let lodgings to young gentlemen like yourself. I had everything to do, but plenty to eat. I was happy till I found out about Pet. These young gentlemen were good-natured enough to me, but horribly cruel. I can hardly bear to tell you how cruel they were. They were medical students, and were always talking about experiments. A few days ago they brought home a stray dog—Pet, you know—I gave him the name, for I did not know his rightful one. He had both eyes then. They cut out one—oh, you must believe me; for secret as they were, I saw it done. And the next day Pet's other eye was to have gone—I heard them say so. Only think

of it. To make a poor, patient animal suffer such agonies a second time, to deprive him in cold blood of God's dear daylight. She paused overcome with emotion, then added, "But I determined to save Pet, so in the dead of night, when everyone was asleep, I stole down to the shed where he was and gave him milk and caressed him and made him understand that I was going to be his friend. He was stupefied with the pain and the fear he had gone through, but he understood, did you not, Pet? We stole away, Pet trotting after me quiet as a lamb—that was last night. I got away from the streets as soon as I could into the quieter, darker parts, and when morning came we went into a church and munched our bread there in a dark corner and rested for hours. In my hurry to get away I left the little money I had behind me. I did not know what to do; but when it grew dusk we walked on and on. We passed the New River an hour or two ago. I had wicked thoughts. Pet and I would be safe from harm there--—"

"Don't talk in that doleful strain," young Leffield said. "Here's a beginning for you, anyhow, old fellow."

So saying he broke some biscuit and threw it down. Then slicing the meat off a cold knuckle of mutton, added that to Pet's repast. The little board now looked appetising enough. The cold meat, the butter, above all, the crisp, brown loaf, seemed to awaken almost celestial visions in the eyes of the poor

famished girl. Her eyes glistened, her cheeks glowed, her hand trembled with joy as she glanced from one viand to another.

Young Leffield, hitherto a careless admirer of the other sex, grew rapturous as he gazed. He thought he had never seen eyes so pathetic, cheeks so softly rounded, lips so tempting to kiss. A plain straw hat, bound with a blue ribbon, partly concealed her bright chestnut hair, an ungraceful jacket hid her slender figure, her dress of cheap serge fell in straight folds. Yet in spite of these unsightly lendings, how distractingly pretty she looked! And shy as she was, modest as she was, their position seemed to excuse familiarity. Tossing off a glass of wine before filling her glass, he grew more and more reckless.

"Eat away," he said; "I will wait on you and look on. I am not hungry. But won't you give me a kiss by way of thanking me in advance? Just one, I must have, willy nilly."

He put his hand on her shoulder and laughingly bent down, the girl drawing back. With half-playful, half-rough insistence, he held her hands, and was about to carry out the threat in spite of her efforts to release herself, when a low, ominous growl made him draw back.

Looking down he saw Pet, unmindful of his bone, his one eye glaring, his limbs set ready for a spring.

"Confound that dog of yours," he cried, moving from the table. "I have an idea. Entice him this

way with a piece of meat. We will shut him up in the woodshed till morning."

But Pet's remonstrance had startled Cressy even more than his young host. The watchful, protective attitude of the faithful creature, the jealous tenderness that shone from his one eye, wakened her as from a dream. She became suddenly as unmindful of the little feast spread before her as Pet of his untasted bone. Tears of shame filled her eyes; painful blushes dyed her cheeks. Downcast, humiliated, she took up her bundle and rose to go, Pet following her movements with his gaze.

"I ought not to have come home with you. I must not, I dare not stay here. Pet has reminded me. I had begun not to care at all what became of me, only to get food, I thought, let the rest go. But I am an honest girl—"

One wistful, famished glance she cast at the hospitable table, then with a choking sob moved to the door. Pet, seizing his bone, followed at her heels.

"There is the river," she murmured. "There is the river!"

For a few minutes young Leffield stood irresolute, a prey to alternate mortification and pity. He blamed himself, he blamed the girl, unlucky chance most of all. His manlier instincts bade him recall the wanderer, give her food and shelter, claiming not so much as a word of thanks in return. On the other hand, he argued, what right had she to throw herself thus unconditionally

at the mercy of a stranger—to expect reserve and consideration under such circumstances? But he was not hardened, much less callous. The sight of such forlornness had touched him. So long as he lived he would never forget Cressy's parting glance at the untasted meal. Before she could reach the gate he was there.

"Come back, eat and drink, for God's sake," he whispered, "I will not so much as speak to you again."

On the threshold he left them. Noiselessly creeping upstairs he took possession of his comrade's empty room, and if he rested lightly, at least his sleep was disturbed by no evil dreams.

The over-tired Cressy and Pet woke up late, but to a comfortable world. Young Leffield's landlady, to whom their story had to be told, interested herself on their behalf. Cressy was placed as maid-of-all-work with a friendly dairyman. Pet's board and lodging were accepted as half her wages.

THE FATEFUL GLANCE.

THE FATEFUL GLANCE.

(A TALE OF THE TERROR.)

CHAPTER I.

IDYLLIC.

It was the blossoming season in Touraine, a hundred years ago; then, as now, the garden of France; then, as to-day, the home of happy lovers. Black clouds were gathering in the distance, already hung imminent over the capital; peace still reigned throughout the pleasant, prosperous land.

Not a disquieting rumour marred the general tranquility. Here, too, the peasant, no mere beast of burden, could share the hopefulness with his betters. For him, also, the harvest meant a golden gathering in—a season of fruition and thankfulness. Enlightened seigneurs here and there had anticipated the Revolution by a voluntary surrender of feudal claims. The privileges, so abundantly enjoyed by the towns, had stimulated the village communes in their struggle for liberty. Feudality, with its odious abuses, was gradually yielding to the force of public opinion. Perhaps nowhere was the *noblesse* less hated.

Heiress, *certes,* of many hatreds, Marcelle de Velancourt, the girlish mistress of Château Velancourt, a splendid estate bordering the Loire, had yet earned many devoted affections. Not quite eighteen, she could hardly be called mistress of what belonged to her. Nevertheless, she had succeeded in no small degree in emancipating herself from the frigid rule of trustees and governesses. High spirited, sweet tempered, and gifted with rare insight into character, she was little likely to become the toy of flatterers of fortune.

The young lady's independence of character manifested itself in small things as well as great. To-day, for instance, when a lackey brought word that the Sieur Lavalle (the word Monsieur was as yet reserved for the upper classes) finding mademoiselle alone, would return to pay his respects later, she gave the prompt order—

"Run after the Sieur Lavalle and bring him back. His business is not with my governess, but with me."

A few minutes later the young *prolétaire* was ushered in; aristocrat seemed the more appropriate designation, so dignified the young man's bearing, so frank and refined his face, so clear and accurate his speech.

"You are going to Paris?" Marcelle asked, with perceptible emotion.

Over the intruder also there came an instantaneous change. He looked on the carpet; his lip trembled; he could not get out a word.

"You will never come back!" Marcelle cried, her

cheeks aflame, hot tears in her eyes, every limb a-tremble. Then she turned away, and hiding her face in her hands, murmured between her sobs, "I lose my only friend then, and for ever!"

"Because I am your friend, I must go," at last Lavalle got out. "What am I if I remain on a level with your valet? But in Paris a man is what his talents make him. I go to study for the Bar; perhaps to win fortune and a name—a name, who knows, may be, worthy of you—"

"Léonce," the girl said, clinging to him, "we have loved each other from childhood. In three years' time I will be your wife. No one—nothing shall prevent me from keeping my word. Stay here then; remain near me."

He dropped a kiss on her fair hair, but put her away gently.

"No, love, no," he said; "it cannot be. We must separate and trust each other. I should despise myself if I waited for your fortune, allowing my own faculties to rust, consenting to live a life of ease and selfish idleness; and you, in turn would despise me also."

"But you will be as one dead to me. My relations in Paris will not receive you. When I go there to be introduced at Versailles, I shall not dare so much as to give you a sign. If you were here, we should meet from time to time; we should never be really separated; your presence would strengthen me."

"Will not my memory do that? Ah," he added,

with fondest insinuation, "I am not deceived. You trust yourself and me. You only wish me to stay because happiness might thus come sooner. Let us earn it. What are three years to a brave man and true woman?"

"My noble Léonce!" she cried, rising to his own height; "yes, I did but frame excuses to keep you here. My heart is yours wherever you go. And you, I would trust you, not three years, but a lifetime!"

So the lovers parted: the law student to make his way in spite of difficulties and privations, to hear, for the first time, the retributive voice that soon made Europe tremble, to become one with the tempestuous spirit of the age; the youthful *chatelaine* he left behind, cradled in soft dreams and sweet illusions, fairy-tale princess beguiled into treacherous slumber!

CHAPTER II.

THE LOOK ASKANCE.

It was the terrible year of '93. Hapless prey of vultures—France writhed in the clutches of famine, war, and anarchy. Maddened by suffering, yielding to the sway of fierce leaders, the people committed excesses for which history has not yet pardoned them. Only splendid patriotism and isolated deeds of heroic devotion lighted up the prevailing gloom and inspired a ray of hope.

One scene that took place before the Revolutionary

Tribunal was cited at the time as an instance of the hatred dividing class and class, also of the self-possession shown by delicate women at the mercy of monsters in human shape.

So many victims had been dispossed of—that is to say, consigned to the guillotine—that it seemed as if the thirst of extermination must be slaked. Yet fresh prisoners were forthcoming, fresh trials, so called, were entered upon without any abatement of ferocity.

The fearful picture was not wanting in alleviative features. Among the assembled faces might be seen some wearing a look of horror and pity; voices on behalf of justice and mercy were raised, at the speaker's peril, in this pandemonium.

A young advocate present had especially distinguished himself. A revolutionary—even a Jacobin—he had, nevertheless, undertaken the defence of more than one aristocrat, winning his cause, not by force of fervour and eloquence—these would have been out of place—but by blunt insistence on facts, legal astuteness, and unanswerable retort. The sharp-tongued, hard-headed pleader from Touraine, so said some, would have saved the king himself had he been chosen as his counsel.

Léonce Lavalle, in the closing days of the Revolutionary Tribunal, remained at his post from morning till night. Hardly did he give himself time for bodily refreshment, so keen his anxiety to watch every trial.

It was evident that he waited for some case in which he took special interest.

At last the expected moment came. The young man sprang to his feet when the remaining prisoner to be tried that day was brought to the bar. For a moment—a moment only—his colour changed; he seemed on the verge of losing self-control. Then making a great effort he recovered himself, and confronted the court, impassable as before.

Marcelle, for it was she, showed hardly less collectedness. The joyous, sparkling, sportive girl had grown into a stately woman. Could mere beauty have melted hearts, no advocate needed she there. But that proud look of self-assertion, that haughty defiance hurled at her persecutors, augured ill for her own safety.

"Your name, citizen?"

"Marcelle de Velancourt, owner of the Château of Velancourt, Touraine, niece of the late Marquis de Pradelles—"

"Enough, citizen."

Not so callous were the members of the Revolutionary Committee as to relish the sound of their victims' names.

"Before the interrogation proceeds, the court requires information on one point. Is any one charged with your defence?"

Marcelle's pale lips had no time to frame a negative, when Léonce sprang to the tribune. In the fiery young advocate she recognised her lover.

No moment this for fond recognition, or interchange of tender glance, or smile. Beholders read nothing in the faces of the pair now confronting each other.

A marble statue hardly colder than the beautiful girl in jeopardy of life, her accusers hardly more cynical than the man bold enough to plead her cause. It was a marvellous piece of acting. Bitter, almost sardonic, the expression the young advocate contrived to assume now. Marcelle no longer seemed the victim of sanguinary wretches, but in his own power, a prey, a toy, to do with as he would. Not a trace of the passionate devotion, which would have betrayed both, in love or look. Not a vestige of softness or pity as his eyes rested on her fair, proud head. He was there, not to save an aristocrat from the guillotine, but in her person to crush, humiliate all nobly born ladies to the dust.

"Citizens!" he cried, with a sardonic laugh that echoed through the hall, "this is no case upon which to waste your time or words. The accused belongs to me. Speak, Marcelle de Velancourt, did you not forswear the traditions of your race, throw in your lot with the people years ago?"

He took from his pocket a ring, and holding it up, added, in the same triumphant tones—

"Swear it before the court, by this ring, the pledge of our troth, by the kiss accorded in the garden of Velancourt, you are the affianced bride of Léonce Lavalle, grandson of your father's serf. Not the scaffold, but your bridegroom, the revolution, the people claim

you, designate you as one of themselves. Hand the tricolour to the accused, citizens; it is her due."

So admirably did he play his part that Marcelle's fate now lay in her own hands. To the spectators her silence indicated pride of sex and birth only. The young *prolétaire* had spoken the truth: here was a nobly born girl who had listened to the love story of a plebeian; but, what else could be expected? She would confront the guillotine rather than acknowledge it now.

All faces were turned from the advocate to the prisoner, and well for him that it was so! His face had grown grey with suspense; big drops gathered to his brow; his hand clutched the rim of his desk nervously; his knees trembled under him. For a moment the lover betrayed himself. No remorseless calculator was here, flinging into a proud girl's face the sentimental folly of early years, taking advantage of her position to enforce a childish promise, winning her hand and fortune for selfish ends; rather an honest man, to whom this woman's life was dearer far than his own.

Marcelle maintained her attitude of rigid calm. That momentary recognition left her collected as before. She seemed to see, to feel nothing, as if the sufferings she had gone through, the fearful memories, the horrible anticipations left no room in her mind but for despair.

"What say you, citizen?" said the prosecutor. "You have but to speak the word, and you are set at liberty."

A tricolour cockade was passed from hand to hand

and held up to Marcelle's gaze. Without seeming to see it, with only a cold side glance towards her lover, she replied in low, firm tones—

"Let the interrogation continue. The citizen yonder is answered."

CHAPTER III.

THE VILLAGE FÊTE.

FLAGS were flying, bells ringing, bonfires flaming, and *Te Deums* chanted throughout France as for some glorious victory. A very delirium of joy possessed all classes. Robespierre had fallen; the Terror was over.

The riverside village crowned by the Château Velancourt resounded with music and dancing. Wine flowed freely; young and old joined in the merry round and patriotic song; all gave way to unbridled triumph and delight.

When night set in, the scene of general festivity changed. At a signal, a curl of flame shot up from the green summit over against the château. As the conflagration spread, the noise of the merry-makers reached the neighbouring villages. Shouts, huzzas, clapping of hands, made up a tumult that upon any other occasion would have suggested Bedlam let loose. The people were mad indeed, but healing awaited them on the morrow.

Soon the confusion ceased; one cry was passed

from mouth to mouth; one name was caught up by all as a watchword.

"Léonce Lavalle! Léonce Lavalle!" shouted one and all. "Long live our Léonce, our hero!"

And bareheaded, pale, and looking like a ghost of his former self, the young advocate was borne round the bonfire on the shoulders of former comrades.

It was not as a saviour of innocent lives only that Léonce was received like a victorious general now. From the outset of the Revolution his powerful voice had been raised in the cause of his own class. To his pen were due some of the most scathing criticisms of the seigneurial system; his reports, laid before the National Assembly, being matters of contemporary history.

Just when the intoxication was at its height, a girl dressed in white, and having flowers in her hand, approached the hero timidly. More like an apparition she looked than living flesh and blood, and so the good folk seemed to think, for at the first glance all fell back, dazed and speechless. Only when she addressed now her old gardener, now her childhood's nurse, did the murmur run through the crowd.

"It is she, then: no other than Marcelle de Velancourt! They said she was dead; but she, too, like our Léonce, has escaped the guillotine!"

There had never been anything like hatred or distrust between these peasant folk and the young *chatelaine;* rather here—borderland of La Vendée—might

be found that clan-like tie between class and clan which resulted in such heroism, and, alas! disaster later on. Marcelle's family, too, had ever been kindly, whilst she, for her own part, had striven to win affection.

Overjoyed as were the simple souls to see their young lady, and to be convinced with their own eyes that she belonged to the living and not to the dead, they yet uttered not a word. If Léonce looked a phantom of his former self, still more changed was the sparkling, vivacious girl, his companion in misfortune. Suffering, privation, loss of kinsfolk—all these things had done their work. Yet she looked more beautiful than ever with that pathos in her eyes, that air of shadowy frailness. As Léonce caught sight of the white-robed vision—so, indeed, at first it seemed to him—he uttered an exclamation of joy and wonder; he seemed ready to bound forward and gather her to his arms. Immediately afterwards, his mood changing with lightning-like swiftness, his brow grew dark; instead of love and welcome, scorn, contempt, almost aversion, were written on his face. He awaited her coming rigid as a statue.

Pale, trembling, a sob choking her utterance, Marcelle advanced murmuring words of gratitude and congratulation. Overcome as she was with emotion, sobs checking her utterance, she yet ventured to look up. He glanced aside, refusing to meet her gaze, and that look askance told her all. She was misunderstood, accused, unforgiven!

CHAPTER IV.

THE LIFTED MASK.

It was a summer evening several years later when two figures encountered each other, chancewise, in the little cemetery of Velancourt. The man, wearing black and bearing two wreaths in his hand, had an unmistakable air of distinction. Well dressed, carrying himself erect, now in the full prime of manhood, the great Parisian advocate, Léonce Lavalle, showed not a trace of his homely antecedents and rustic bringing up. The lady, a fair, graceful, pathetic-eyed woman, somewhat younger than himself, also wore mourning, and bore on her arm a basket of freshly gathered lilies.

"You were thinking of my poor little girl, mademoiselle?" he said. "Is it, then, by your hands that these graves of mine are perpetually bright with flowers?"

Marcelle raised her veil, confronting him with her pathetic eyes, and said, smiling sadly—

"It is a very little thing to do. You would not let me love them, your child and her mother, whilst they lived. I remember them and you always."

He watched her as, stooping down, she strewed her flowers over the two graves—one of recent date covered with daisied turf; the other surmounted by a stone crucifix placed there a year or two before.

"I would not let you love them?" he said, when her task was over. "How could I do that? Forget

what had happened? Let us not allude to the past, Mademoiselle de Velancourt. There are outrages no man can forgive. I thank you for these flowers. I am glad to see you well. Adieu."

He turned away, and for a moment Marcelle stood irresolute. Womanly pride and her sense of justice battled within. She ought, she must, tell him the truth. But how?

"Léonce," she got out at last, "that promise I gave you years ago. I was ready to fulfil it. I never intended to deceive."

"You might have deceived—played the coquette; I should have suffered less. The moment of your peril came. I stepped forward to rescue you, blinding your accusers by a subterfuge you and none other could understand. I feigned triumph—I, who worshipped the ground on which you trod! There was only one way of saving your life. In the attempt I hazarded my own, and for what?" He laughed bitterly. "The look askance of a haughty girl, who preferred the guillotine to what you considered disgrace. You were ready to face the scaffold; you trembled before the scorn of vile wretches thirsting for your blood."

She smiled upon him with tearful, almost contemptuous, pity. Could he have so misread her?

"Your own life," she began, "was in peril. That scornful look of mine, my silence, saved it. If you acted a part, I was forced to do the same. I loved you, Léonce. I was true to you; I preferred the guil-

lotine to your destruction. They warned me beforehand—my fellow prisoners, I mean—that to recognise our friends outside meant certain death to them. I determined to remain blind, dumb, not to seem to see you, for I felt sure you would be there. How little mattered my poor life, but yours was precious to many; and what if my persecutors thought me proud—foolish? I only cared to hold aloof from you—to save you from the horrible doom awaiting myself."

Her voice was broken with weeping now, and she turned towards him, looking the sorrow and tenderness she could not put into words. But his hard mood had not melted yet.

"Could you let me believe ill of you all these years? Nothing else in life ever made me so unhappy; nothing so shook my faith in human nature. Let these matters be; let us bury the past."

"I did write," she went on, eagerly, and producing a little packet yellow with age. "See this note—written in prison—and a lock of my hair. A kindly gaoler promised to hand it you secretly. It was written—as I supposed—on the eve of my death. Oh, Léonce, can you doubt me now?"

He opened the paper with steady, untrembling fingers. She went on, still tearful and passionate—

"I kept my letter. I always meant some day or other to give it to you, but after what happened that night, when I offered my flowers and you turned away scornfully, I waited and waited. And then I heard of

your marriage, and my opportunity seemed gone. Why should I disturb your peace? Better be forgotten altogether."

"You were never forgotten," he murmured at last, as he pressed to his lips the tear-stained letter written under the shadow of death. "Marcelle, my Marcelle! forgive my blindness. The masks are laid aside. We were ready to die for each other; let us live for each other instead."

So the mistress of Velancourt gave her hand to the brilliant advocate whose name was famous throughout France, and the efforts of the pair on behalf of their poorer neighbours are chronicled in local history. Here might be observed the first spinning wheel that had hummed in those parts; a school and reading-room were opened; Marcelle dowered the village maidens, and Léonce helped many a promising lad to make his way in the world. Velancourt became a little centre of rural industry and progress, like many another spot taken in hand at this time, alike by aristocrat and plebeian.

THE

MAN WITH THE WAXEN FINGER.

THE

MAN WITH THE WAXEN FINGER.

I.

It happened one midwinter, many years ago, that, in company with other travellers, I was snowed up at Marseilles. I had embarked from Algiers, leaving tropical weather behind me, but a sudden storm came up in the Gulf of Lyons. After tossing about uncomfortably for many hours in sight of port, we were obliged to put back to sea, our passage lasting double the usual time. Instead of finding clouds of dust, a hot wind, and blinding sunshine—the tourist's usual portion at Marseilles—the aspect of the city was wholly Siberian. A snow storm of almost unheard of severity had swept over central and southern France, blocking roads and railways, and, for the time, completely cutting off communication with Paris. We were only a day's journey from the capital, but no one could give us any idea as to the time of getting there. Detachments of soldiers were at work all along the line, clearing the snow as fast as they could; so deep were the drifts, and so

thickly embedded the cuttings, that we were assured the incarceration might last for ten days, or even more.

A pleasant delay enough it was for those who were in no hurry to continue their journey. The hotel at which I had put up with other snowbound travellers was comfort itself. Cheerful wood fires blazed all over the house. Corridors, staircases, and salons were brilliantly illumined at dusk. The midday and six o'clock *tables d'hôte* offered a variety of French dishes, cooked in the best French manner; after dinner, music, conversation, and cards made up for the want of letters and newspapers. For, of course, as the railway was impassable, we were cut off from these, or only obtained them by a roundabout route several days after they were due.

The company was a varied and sociable one; fortunately, also, not without accomplishments. One could set our hair on end with ghost stories; another could melt us to tears with pathetic verse; a third send us into paroxysms of laughter with mimicry and caricature; a fourth puzzle us out of our wits with sleight of hand. Above all there were some equally well pleased to look on and applaud. Let me particularise a little, for the strange circumstances which I am going to narrate have imprinted every detail on my memory.

I see before me, as if they were acquaintances of yesterday, the two middle-aged Englishmen—what hotel ordinary is without them?—who had seen everything in Europe from Spitzbergen to the Golden Horn, and who

made themselves unobtrusively agreeable to everybody; the cheery old priest, just arrived after twenty years' missionary work in Cochin China; the young French naval officer, about to join his squadron at Toulon; the clever actress, starring it as a dramatic reader; the good-natured, rotund little pianist, her husband; the pretty American sisters, with their somewhat unsophisticated parents from Chicago; lastly, the pair of West Indians, the two Basilios. These young men, so singularly alike as to suggest the notion of twins, arrived only two or three days before the breaking up of our little party. They had disembarked at Bordeaux from the Manillas, and were bound to Algiers, one of them having just inherited a large property in the French colony. So he carelessly told me as we chatted at dinner, and I daresay I should have thought no more of the communication but for an incident that happened a few hours later.

The new comers did not join us in the salon. My dinner-table companion lingered on the threshold, as if intending to do so; even entered into a lively *tête-à-tête* with the vivacious Americans when the other called him away. I saw no more of them, and was thinking—must I confess the lazy wish?—what a pity we could not remain snowbound a week or two longer, when two voices in the adjoining room diverted my attention.

I at once recognised the peculiar accent of the young West Indians. The first speaker, my *table d'hôte* neighbour, seemed bent on expostulation.

"Why so suspicious, so ready to think ill, of every one you meet, Raymond?" he was saying, impatiently. "We are most likely not among sharpers or assassins. Moreover, I do not carry my newly-acquired fortune in my breast pocket. What earthly harm can it do to tell an English tourist that I am going to take possession of a large estate in Algeria?"

"Prattling of private affairs to entire strangers can never do good," retorted the other. "Do you wish, before you have been under your own roof for four-and-twenty hours, to be beset by speculators, money jobbers, and adventurers? And you are not able to say no. You would fall an easy prey to the wary."

"I must go my own way. Don't interfere with me, Raymond, there's a good fellow," was the reply, spoken not ungently, yet in a muffled voice. "You know that I shall do all in my power to atone for your wrongs, and always treat you like a brother. But I cannot be harangued. I cannot be guided."

Here the conversation ended, so far as my own ears were concerned. Softly opening the door, I hastened along the luxuriously-carpeted corridor, and joined the company downstairs. But something, both in the manner of the speakers and the purport of their words, had aroused my curiosity. Next day, without appearing to do so, I watched the pair narrowly.

As I have already mentioned, they were extraordinarily alike: of the same age, stature, and build; and with features and complexion so nearly similar that

it was difficult for strangers to identify them apart. This marked natural resemblance was kept up by fictitious means. They were dressed after precisely the same fashion, down to the colour of their neckties and the make of their enamel sleeve studs. Hair and beard were cropped to the same proportions. Each carried a hair watch chain of the same pattern, an eyeglass set in gold, and a diamond ring on the fourth finger of the left hand.

Those sparkling diamond rings led me to a strange discovery. The franker, more genial of the two, the newly-made millionaire, had by some freak of nature, or accident in childhood, been deprived of his left-hand little finger, the loss being most skilfully replaced by a waxen imitation. No one, unless minutely watching his manipulations, would ever have found out the secret. The artificial limb precisely resembled a real one. It was jointed, and with a spring, moved by gentle friction, could be straightened, bent, and unbent again. In fact, its owner was, to all intents and purposes, as well off in the matter of fingers as his fellows, with one reservation: he could not play the piano.

"What a privation! Never to be able to learn music," he observed to me as if divining my thoughts.

"You were scrutinising my waxen finger, just now, sir: I would exchange a hundred times its weight in gold for your own of flesh and blood, bone and muscle."

"I am half inclined to wish that we could strike a bargain on the spot," I replied, laughingly. "Pianoforte

playing is not much in my line; nor is money making my strong point."

We happened to be alone in the smoking-room after breakfast, and he seemed disposed to talk.

"Well," he sighed good-humouredly, "we must be thankful to get such a substitute, and he moved the spring, showing me the wondrously ingenious mechanism of his waxen finger. "Now, shall I tell you where to go for artificial limbs—noses, ears, legs, anything? There is only one place in the world where they can be had to perfection."

I acquiesced readily. We can never possess too much miscellaneous information, and I wanted to learn more of his history.

"I lost my finger by an accident five years ago, and my father sent me to Paris on purpose to have it replaced by the celebrated artist and mechanician; but here is his card. I carry the address of my benefactor about with me wherever I go, in the hope of rendering him service. Stay: I will write a word on the back, and if you have an hour to dispose of when next in Paris, do visit his atelier—museum, I should rather call it. You will be much amused."

He moved to the table, took up a pen, and wrote on the reverse side of the business card, "From your friend and well-wisher, Constant Adolf Basilio."

Having pocketed the missive, we chatted about other subjects. I found him a pleasant, fairly-educated, gentlemanly young fellow, not at all brilliant or superfluously

endowed with worldly wisdom: not at all calculated to make his way, as the phrase goes; rather I set him down as the too easily led and guided—or misguided—however much he might resent anything that wore the look of interference. Truth to tell, I felt sorry for him, in spite of his good fortune. I foresaw many a pitfall into which he would tumble headlong—many a snare that would be laid by the self-seeking and the unscrupulous.

And I mistrusted his companion, the half-brother of the left hand—for such I took him to be—who kept jealous watch over the young heir, already acting the part of a self-constituted guardian. On his side evidently lay all the masterfulness and determination.

Strive as he might, the newly-made millionaire must sooner or later become subordinate to the will of his worldly inferior; so at least it seemed to me. We became quite friendly after that little conversation, but in a day or two the blockade of snow was raised, and our group of ice-bound travellers broke up.

"Mind and pay me a visit if ever you cross over to Africa," said Constant to me at parting. His half brother was absent. "I can offer you splendid sport—horses, dogs, Arab beaters: all most heartily at your service. And if you accidentally lose a finger you now know where to go for a substitute."

II.

TEN years had passed away. That pleasant imprisonment at Marseilles, my flirtations with the pretty Americans, our charades, dances, and concerts, the two Basilios, the easy-going, affable heir, and his reserved, suspicious double—all these had wellnigh faded from my memory, when quite unexpectedly I found myself on the way to Algiers. As I steamed from the grand French harbour and mused on my plans, I determined, if time and opportunity permitted, to find the young men out—middle-aged they would be by this time. The second visit to Marseilles had brought a vivid recollection of the first. I felt as much interested in the fate of my friend Constant of the waxen finger as if I had only parted from him the week before.

Algiers, however, is one thing; Algeria another. When I referred to the address given me just ten years before, with the map of the French colony spread on the table, I felt tempted to give up the projected visit.

I had pictured to myself a pleasant day's excursion in the immediate environs of the city. I now discovered that my undertaking was quite formidable. The railway helped me one-third of the way, about seventy miles in all; the diligence would take me about as far again; the remaining twenty and odd miles of wild country I must get over as best I could. The whole thing savoured certainly of hazard and adventure, but on further consideration I decided to set out. I had as yet

seen next to nothing of French Africa. If I failed to find my former acquaintance, I should, at any rate, traverse an unknown and curious region. The weather was splendid, my health was of the best, and two weeks of holiday still remained at my disposal. Far better to spend them in exhilarating enterprise than in the hot, fashionable boulevards of what may be called Brighton beyond seas.

Everything went well. The bit of railway on the line to Constantine led me through charming scenery. I was fortunate enough to secure a good seat outside the diligence. The eight hours' journey was full of interest to a stranger.

What most struck me was the mixture of savagery and civilisation: here brand-new, state-constructed French villages, with a toylike town hall, school house, and police station—the tricolour flying everywhere; there, in close juxtaposition, a collection of Bedouin tents: the dark-skinned, wild-looking population, with their flocks and herds, recalling Bible scenes. On all sides the vegetation was magnificent, olives being evidently the predominating crop.

The diligence stopped at last, and as night was at hand I took up my quarters in the posthouse, a straggling, comfortless, dingy inn, where, however, I obtained a decent bed and a good supper.

On inspecting the stables, I found that anything in the shape of a fairly comfortable carriage was out of the question. Instead I hired a couple of the best

horses to be had, engaged the services of a retired soldier as guide, and next day, soon after sunrise, was once more on my way.

"Do you know a gentleman named Basilio living in these parts?" I asked of my conductor.

"Who does not?" was the reply. "He is worth a million."

"Is he married? Has he children?"

"His wife is pleasure; his gold pieces are his family. You will see the splendid place he has built in these deserts."

Very desert like and solitary indeed was the region we had now entered upon. Again and again we had to cross a wide river bed: in places dry; in others the water up to the horses' flanks, the steep banks glowing with oleanders, now in full bloom.

Far and wide stretched the rocky waste; here and there groves of the silvery green olive and golden palm breaking the brown monotony. At rare intervals we came upon some little oasis, the walled-in premises of an ostrich farmer enterprising enough to settle down amid such solitudes; around his fortified encampments slopes of vineyard, olive orchards, and pastures.

Towards noon we reached a little inn, and, as the heat was now intense, rested there an hour or two, my companion assuring me that we should reach our destination before nightfall. There was no help for it then. My acquaintance of ten years before might have forgotten me. He would be compelled to offer me hospitality.

I reassured myself with the reflection that no visit could well wear the look of an intrusion under such circumstances. Almost the face of an enemy must surely be welcome at this world's end!

It was twilight when, hungry and tired, we came in sight of the Campagne Basilio, a large, handsome structure, in the style of a modern château, and surrounded, as all houses are in Algeria, with a lofty wall by way of protection; outside that enclosure were park-like glades and shrubberies; within, flower gardens, fountains, aviaries: all most beautifully kept.

The aspect of the place was not that of a bachelor's home. Every window blazed with cheerful light; servants bustled hither and thither; and, as we rode up to the front door, two smart Arab grooms ran forward to seize the bridles, as if we were expected. It was evident that some kind of festivity was going on, and that I was supposed to be an invited guest.

Whilst I stood hesitating as to what course to pursue—how best to frame an excuse for an untimely intrusion—I heard the well-remembered accent of my old acquaintance. Having warmly received two visitors arrived just before, he now turned to myself, all hospitality and preoccupation. "I offer many apologies for this unexpected appearance," I said; "I am an Englishman—you may remember me: Fletcher by name—Vincent Fletcher—and happening to be in Algeria—"

"You are most heartily welcome," he exclaimed; "I receive many visits from your countrymen on their way

to Constantine. I am delighted to show them the country. Excuse me—"

Here he greeted another new comer.

"The fact is," he added, "I am to-night entertaining a large hunting party, and my mind is distracted by a thousand details. Hamed, conduct this gentleman to a bed-room. Let me see: the west room, and see that his attendant and horses are well cared for. In a quarter of an hour the bell will ring for dinner," he added; then, with a pleasant smile and second hand-shake, he left me in charge of the Arab servant.

The dining room, where the large company assembled a little later, presented a brilliant scene.

Magnificent candelabra, with their myriad lights, were reflected in the mirrors set around. Silver in abundance glittered on the snowy damask; crystal and coloured glass sparkled, whilst from end to end of the long table were displayed brilliant tropic flowers and delicate ferns. To crown all, only Arabs were in attendance, clad in gala dresses. I found my host surrounded by his friends, and only won a friendly nod from him before we sat down to table.

Well, I said to myself, my explanation, such as it was, would keep. When a man has built himself a palace on the confines of the desert, he evidently needs no letters introductory from chance visitors. A chance partaker of his splendour is only too welcome. So I took my place, bowed to my table companions, and resolved to enjoy the altogether unexpected turn of affairs.

We numbered upwards of twenty in all, the party being composed of two Arab chiefs, a couple of French officers, a cheery old priest, and several sunburnt colonists and civilians—probably the doctor, notary, and magistrate of the nearest town.

It was some time before anything was attempted worthy the name of conversation. Everybody seemed to be in my own case—that is to say, excessively hungry; and during the first half hour the chief accompaniment to the banquet was the clatter of knives and forks.

When the first imperative calls of hunger were satisfied, I glanced at my host.

Whilst ten years had outwardly much changed me, most likely past recognition, he remained the same. My own hair had taken a silvery gleam; his close-cut beard and curly locks were still black as ever. A slim stripling at twenty-three, I was now almost forty; I had grown portly; he seemed hardly to have gained a quarter of an inch in breadth.

Yet as I studied his physiognomy I perceived an alteration—of what nature I could not define—but change was there. And the more and more I became familiar with my former acquaintance, the more clearly did I recognise it. The candid, almost lethargic expression, the amiable yieldingness of early years, had given way to a certain hardness and cynicism—also a certain reserve that had been wholly wanting in the Constant Adolf Basilio of ten years before. Excess of

good fortune had turned my frank, ingenuous companion into a worldling.

The banquet had now become more animated; sparkling wine circulated freely. Amid the Babel of voices, it was almost impossible to make one's own heard. Yet I was conscious of interchanging a few commonplaces with my neighbour, the Abbé.

All this time my gaze was fascinated to the other end of the table. I could not help glancing furtively at this enigmatic host—the same man, yet not the same, known so well during that snowbound imprisonment at Marseilles.

As I watched him, without, of course, appearing to do so, an incident, trivial in itself, made my heart beat quickly. The master of the house, in rapidly moving his glass, had come in contact with the sharp edge of a knife as the servant was removing it. I think my own eyes were the only ones to observe what followed. A tiny crimson drop rose to the surface of the fourth finger of his left hand.

Horror stricken at the revelation, I yet mastered myself sufficiently to ask the old priest—

"Is it long, Monsieur l'Abbé, since you have been in these regions—since you have known our host?"

"This is the fourteenth year of my ministration in Africa," he replied. "I was the first to welcome the young heir to his new home."

"Did he arrive unaccompanied—without any relation?" I contrived to get out.

"He was unhappily—or perhaps happily for himself—alone in the world," was the answer. "That is to say, if any one can be called so who inherits a million."

I was now past reasoning with myself. Utterly regardless of the consequence, only mindful of the foul plot I had just unravelled, of the unhappy youth whose place was filled by his murderer, I rose to my feet, and by a wild, almost a superhuman effort, commanded silence.

"Fellow guests," I cried, "this is no hour for feast or rejoicing. Ask him to whose board you have been bidden what he has done with the real Constant Adolf Basilio! This is no jest," I added, facing the guilty man, "but solemn earnest. That red spot on the fourth finger of your left hand, that drop of blood surreptitiously wiped away just now, has betrayed you. I knew your unhappy namesake well. I can prove to one and all here assembled that long before setting out for Africa, the fourth finger of his left hand had been replaced by a waxen substitute. What was his fate, what happened after I said "adieu" to him at Marseilles on the twenty-third of January, 1869, shall be my business to learn."

* * * * *

True enough, after a long and laborious trial, now celebrated in the criminal annals of the French colony, the mystery was brought to light and the fictitious Basilio to justice. He was condemned to lifelong incarceration for having caused the death of his half-

brother by drowning, off the coast of Marseilles, just after my departure.

The brothers had quitted the hotel with their baggage early in the day on which the steamer started for Algiers, but on that same morning, it transpired that two young West Indian gentlemen had hired a boat in the harbour for a row. Only one returned, the explanation being given that the other had alighted at a certain point, preferring to walk back. As the movements of the pair concerned none but themselves, the fact that two had quitted the hotel and only one embarked passed unnoticed. The rest of the scheme was easy of accomplishment, not a soul in the African colony knowing either the real heir to the property or his double.

THE PASSING OF THE CUP.

THE PASSING OF THE CUP.

I.

SILENT as a death chamber itself was the large, luxuriantly-furnished room in which lay the greatest lawyer of his time, stricken down, as it seemed, with mortal disease. The solemn stillness and desertion that had so suddenly overtaken the place offered a startling contrast to the look of careless feminine disorder still reigning there. On the rich satin coverlid might be seen a woman's *négligé* of delicate primrose-coloured cashmere bordered with costly lace, the mistress of the house having evidently but that moment quitted her post by the sick man's bed. The dressing table glittered with knickknacks and trinkets; these, too, apparently thrown down in haste—a gold-stoppered smelling bottle, a little purse of dainty workmanship, a set of ivory tablets framed in gold, a tiny embroidered handkerchief, and, lastly, two or three notes on rose-tinted paper and a bunch of keys. The contents of a lady's pocket had also been emptied on a sudden. A general look of disarrangement suggested the precipitate, agitated search for some priceless object unexpectedly missing. One or two drawers of a Chippendale cabinet stood open; the

jewel case seemed to have been ransacked; whilst the elaborate order usually reigning in the bed-rooms of the rich was wholly and mysteriously absent.

No less striking to the rigid watcher seemed the contrast presented by the prostrate figure beside him, and a retrospection of the life now so seriously jeopardised. Lustreless now those eyes before whose eagle glance the stoutest of hearts were wont to tremble; shrunken the lips on whose fiery eloquence had oft-times hung life and death. The subtle lawyer, the irresistible pleader, the impassible judge, lay feeble as an infant in the grip of unaccountable disease. Without warning, and whilst enjoying the plenitude of mental and bodily powers, the hale sexagenarian had been stricken down.

After a considerable period of coma, following artificial sleep, he opened his eyes, and, with a great effort, partially raised himself on the pillow. Glancing round to find no one present but the physician, he said, making a feeble attempt at rebuke—

"Doctor, you have given me a sleeping potion against my orders."

The doctor was also of high distinction in his profession, and only to so illustrious a patient would he have accorded the services of a nurse. It was now four of the clock, post-meridian, and he had not quitted the house since daybreak.

"Nay, Sir Hector, we physicians accept no commands from our patients," he replied.

The sick man's authoritative air, contrasted as it was with his physical helplessness, evoked a smile, although a sad one. A weight of care and gloom clouded the doctor's brow.

The patient uttered a little ejaculation of impatience. Then sinking back on the pillows, and closing his eyes as he felt that resistance were hopeless, he murmured—

"Call Paulina—my wife."

The other paused for a moment, and the strangest expression came into his face, an expression made up of compassion, abhorrence, and grim foreboding. Quickly recovering himself, he replied, in a tone of forced cheeriness—

"That behest I must not obey either."

The unqualified refusal, and the total absence of any expletive, struck the discerning ears of the great lawyer. The business of his life had been to draw inferences; with electric despatch he now arrived at the right conclusion.

"I have been put to sleep because something was to be concealed from me. My Paulina is ill!" he cried, his fingers nervously clutching the bed-clothes, the weak voice trembling with rising wrath, fondness, and anxiety.

Again the physician paused. To tell a lie was impossible to him, the truth he dared not so much as hint at just yet. How to beguile this abnormally alert intellect, and soothe these painfully keen susceptibilities?

He grasped the white hand, trembling on the coverlid, with his cool palm.

"It was better for both — that your wife, Lady Vanderoy, should not nurse you any longer. Hearken, Sir Hector," he added, in kind, deeply earnest tones, "I hold out to you a good prospect of recovery. But on one condition, and one only. No more amateur nursing; no more hysterical crying about you. You must place yourself entirely under my own care and that of my trained nurses."

"Paulina is docile. She would obey your orders, if necessary," wailed the patient.

"Come, Sir Hector," the doctor answered, with well-affected raillery, "you know much better than that. When did any woman so much as obey her husband's orders, much more those of another man? You value life. Make these small sacrifices cheerfully."

"Small sacrifices, you call them?" groaned the judge. "But I will not be selfish. You are doubtless thinking of my sweet girl. She ought not to breathe the air of a sick room any longer. But Everard, dear Everard, who has ever been as a son to me, is he to be banished too?"

The doctor's face darkened.

"Mr. Everard Elton has been suddenly called away —on urgent business," he said, drily. Then with a change of tone, seeing the tears of disappointment that trickled down the patient's cheek, he added, with skilfully concealed irony, "Mr. Elton is good company, I

admit, but the best company in the world for a sick man, Sir Hector, is that of his nurse and doctor. You must now have your beef tea and try to sleep."

II.

All went well throughout the remainder of that day and the ensuing night. The great judge slept quietly at intervals, and whenever waking up, to murmur fretfully—

"Paulina! my little Paulina! Everard, my dear boy Everard!"

Whereupon the doctor would interfere, repeating the old arguments and injunctions; or, if he quitted the room, in his turn to snatch a little rest, the newly-appointed nurses soothed with words to the same effect. Lady Vanderoy was necessarily absent; she had already acted the part of nurse too long. Mr. Everard Elton had been obliged to leave on unexpected business: such the lesson they had learned, parrot wise from the doctor's lips.

Towards dawn, as is often the case with the sick, Sir Hector grew wakeful and alert. The torpor of the last few days seemed thrown off; his eyes brightened; his cheeks showed a glow of returning vitality; he was getting the better of an acute crisis.

"Ah! Daylight at last. Draw aside the curtains, doctor," he said, in a clear, hopeful voice. "Night is past. In a few hours my Paulina will be here."

"Did I say so?" asked the doctor in the dry, im-

perturbable tone of yesterday. "The false steps of weeks are not to be undone in as many hours. Hear it from my lips for once and for all, sir: your recovery, your very life, depends on following my instructions to the very letter."

The sick man, with palpable effort, checked his rising wrath, and once more the habit of drawing inferences came to his aid.

"I read your thoughts, doctor," he said, as a slight flush overspread his beardless, Roman features. "You have ever been of opinion that neither in sickness nor in health is a sexagenarian fit partner for a girl of twenty. I know well enough what has been your opinion of my marriage—I may say so—the only piece of downright folly I was ever guilty of."

The doctor remained dumb.

"And now you are of opinion that Paulina's changing, vivacious humours, her alternating tears and smiles, are adverse to recovery. Well, I give in. I admit that I never behold her enter the room—a vision of girlish loveliness—unmoved. Her beauty stirs me with sweetest emotion now as when first I called her mine."

"There is a time for sweet emotion and a time for hard reasoning," was the caustic reply. "You have made a stride forward. Thanks to what, may I ask—Lady Vanderoy's nursing or my own?"

"True, true," answered the patient, shaking his friend's hand. "Both Paulina and Everard—Heaven bless them!—did their very best. They were unre-

mitting in their attentions, but, of course, quite without experience. Besides, my sweet little wife needs rest and fresh air. I have been a monster of selfishness to let her devote herself to me so long. I will be henceforth tractable, to be rewarded in advance. Hand me yonder miniature."

Not without a frown and demur, the physician yielded, and an ivory miniature, framed in solid gold, was placed in the other's impatient fingers.

It was the portrait of a dazzlingly handsome girl—child were the more appropriate term, for the golden-haired, rosy-lipped, blue-eyed sitter could hardly have seen her sixteenth birthday. Feminine witchery here reached its acme, but it was witchery of the most soul-less type. No intellectual depth showed itself in the small, round brow; no tenderness played in the smile, want of heart and mind being softened by excessive artlessness and youth. Her hair fell in short, loose curls about her shoulders; her white frock, confined with a blue sash, showing bare throat and arms, had a look of the nursery.

"Is it not an exquisite picture?" asked Sir Hector, gazing with eyes spell-bound. "To think that a dry old lawyer like myself calls such a rosebud his own! But you are far more beautiful now, my Paulina."

For some minutes he remained holding the miniature straight before him, fascinated as by a spell; then the doctor saw his expression change. For a moment a

look of pain—even of horror—came into his face, followed by a self-reproachful, incredulous smile.

"Put it back, doctor, and I will tell you of a foolish—an insane—fancy, of an incident that the sight of this miniature recalls to me—to be revealed, promise me on your honour, to no living soul."

"My yea and nay have ever been held tantamount to an oath, Sir Hector. If you wish to confide anything to me, pray do so."

"I may recover, doctor, or I may not; anyhow, it will do no harm to confess to you. Yes, it is a confession I am about to make. Strange to say, I have had something on my mind for the best part of my life—I will out with it now!"

He settled himself comfortably on his pillows and began:—

"You belong to a younger generation than myself, but had reached man's estate when I won my laurels: in other words, when I undertook the defence which raised me to the very pinnacle of my profession. Where were you at the time I allude to? You cannot have forgotten the Altown Assizes connected with my name?"

"I remember the incident you refer to perfectly well," rejoined the doctor, looking unnerved and embarrassed. "Would it not be as well to defer your proposed communication?"

"No, I must out with it; and now or never is the time. All the world knows I am no church-goer; for my religion, such as it is, I am not beholden to the

parsons or their doctrine. But I have ever been a scrupulous, God-fearing man. I dare not go to the grave with a black lie on my soul!"

He waited for a moment to collect his thoughts; then went on, in calm, measured tones, evidently anxious not to overdo his strength.

"You say that you remember the trial I alluded to? It was a poisoning case. A girl of extraordinary attractiveness and beauty, as attractive and beautiful—Heaven forgive the comparison—as my own darling; in features and complexion reminding me just now of yonder sweet, innocent child, my girl wife, my Paulina—was charged with poisoning her step-father. The motive had been pure, diabolical vengeance. The victim, a worthy fellow enough, having from the best possible motives stepped in between herself and a wealthy but disreputable marriage—had, indeed, prevented her from selling herself to a villainous old man for money. From that moment he was doomed. He died after cruel suffering of several days duration, death being caused by poison.

"I may now say to you that never, throughout the entire course of my professional career, did I light upon a worse piece of business. The blackness of heart, the depravity of extreme youth, was so apparent, the utter callousness to every sentiment, except that of self-indulgence and self-preservation so shocking. Of the prisoner's guilt there could lurk no vestige of doubt in the mind of any fairly-intelligent person; but she was

young; she was fascinating, and marvellously lovely to look upon. I determined to save her, and save her I did.

"I wonder now that the effort which saved her pretty neck from the hangman's rope did not kill her advocate. For days—nay, weeks—before the trial, I hardly gave myself time for necessary sleep. It was not only the gigantic mass of facts, medical and otherwise, I had to master, but the elaboration of my defence, that strained every nerve to the utmost. But I was well rewarded. Never shall I forget the effect of my speech. It was universally admitted afterwards to be one of the finest and most striking pieces of oratory ever listened to in a court of law. A sick, almost a dying, man may well be pardoned a little vanity!

"When the trial was over, and the pretty murderess was, thanks to me, thrown loose on society, I took to my bed, utterly exhausted both in body and mind, unable to resume my duties for weeks. Now for the moral of my story, the promised confession. The public felt that she must be guilty. I knew from her own lips that she was so. Now, I ask, coolly reviewing the matter after an interval of twenty-five years, what right had I, knowing this, to stand up in a hall of justice and proclaim her an innocent woman? What right had I to forget the untimely end and long-drawn-out sufferings of her victim—sufferings I have more than once had in my mind since confined myself to my bed. Curiously enough, too, whilst lying here, reviewing the circum-

stances of my illness, various symptoms have recalled his own. Doctor, don't think me mad! I could swear to you, had I not been tended by those innocent as the angels in heaven, that the wrong-doing confessed just now had brought about fearful retribution—that I, in turn, had been diabolically poisoned!"

The doctor started from his seat and touched the electric bell, overcome with excitement. His patient showed signs of recurring torpor and delirium.

III.

At the end of a week the great judge was pronounced convalescent. So wary had been the doctor's evasions from hour to hour that the interval slipped by imperceptibly. Now that he was once more well enough to glance at the almanack, Sir Hector could hardly believe that for the space of seven whole days his adored young wife and confidential secretary had been banished from him.

At first he easily accounted for such a step on the part of Dr. Eustace. A famous practitioner, an astute man of the world, an honourable gentleman, a friend, moreover, of long standing, the physician had from the first strenuously opposed this unequal marriage. That a distinguished man of sixty should wed an obscurely-born, half-educated beauty of eighteen was, in his eyes, sheer insanity, and he had never sought to conceal his opinion. No wonder that when, at a critical period, the power was in his hands he should substitute the

tried services of experienced nurses for the lovingly-meant but ill-judged ministrations of an inexperienced, impetuous girl.

These conclusions had gradually given way to alarming doubt and surmise. Paulina might have grossly, and through excess of tenderness, mismanaged him, and certainly needed fresh air and repose; but why no hint as to her return, why no letter, not even a message from her?

Everard's silence, too, was very perplexing and very unlike him. Need absence or business ever so urgent prevent him from scribbling a line to his protector and second father? He could doubt no longer. An unexpected blow had fallen upon him. These young, brilliant, loving creatures were stricken down by illness —perhaps in danger. The truth might kill him; learn it he would without a moment's delay.

When the doctor entered, a glance at his patient told him what he might expect. Sir Hector—in arm-chair, dressing gown, and slippers—looked once more his own self. Something of the usual brightness shone in his eyes; the thin lips had regained decision and character; his tremendous physical and intellectual powers were once more restored. The patient was healed, yet Dr. Eustace had never quailed before a revelation as he did now. The doctor himself was white and discomposed. He wore the look of a man who had received a fearful blow in the dark.

"Sit down, doctor," began Sir Hector, now speaking

in his legal voice—the metallic and unanswerable voice that had so often caught trembling witnesses as in a vice. "Sit down and tell me the truth."

"I am here for no other purpose," was the dry answer. "Physic for the body you need no longer."

"One word, my dear friend," cried the other, now in a tone of keenest anguish. He hardly dared to hope any longer.

Sinking back in his chair, he with difficulty got out the words, "Paulina is not dead!"

"Your wife, Lady Vanderoy, is well," was the reply. Then the doctor rose, and clasping his old friend's hands, cried, in a voice fraught with deepest emotion—

"Nerve yourself for news of her far worse than death. Bear up like a man. No one can breathe a word of comfort—"

"I am in a double sense her murderer. Her easily-excited nature has given way under this tension. She is bereft of reason!"

The apparently pitiless, but, in reality, deeply pitying, doctor shook his head.

"Have you no bowels of compassion? Shorten these awful moments!" cried the old man. He had become aged on a sudden, and, pale as death, trembling from head to foot, gasped out—

"No; keep your peace. Never let me learn that my Paulina has come to worse harm!"

Tears trickled down his cheeks. The old look of

feebleness came back. The doctor felt that no disclosure could be more painful than such suspense.

"It is my duty to speak. Better be apprised of the truth from my lips than from the columns of a newspaper," he added in clear, deliberate tones. "Lady Vanderoy and Everard Elton are in prison, charged on evidence not to be shaken with deliberate attempt to murder you by the administration of poison."

The speaker had looked for an outburst of terrible indignation; perhaps even a fierce clutching at his throat and hand-to-hand encounter with a man frenzied by sudden anguish. But even in a moment so stunning, the great lawyer's habit of drawing inferences did not desert him. For a brief interval he sat speechless, rigid, cowed, torn by fiercest conflict, yet intellectually master of himself. In spite of overwhelming mental agony, he was now weighing evidence as carefully as he had done hundreds of times before, when the issues, as now, had been those of life and death.

"It is a foul calumny, an infamous plot," he murmured at last. "Those two beings, so guileless, so devoted to me, both recipients of my favours, have drawn on themselves much enmity. My household, my friends, my relations, public opinion are against them. But I will vindicate their characters from this black slander, unravel this abominable conspiracy—if the effort cost me my life."

He rose, and leaning on his stick, unhinged from

its nail the miniature gazed upon so rapturously a few days before.

"My angel, my pretty one!" he cried as he kissed the ivory again and again; held it to his heart, and wept over it. "Who could for a single instant doubt your innocence!"

Then he held out the portrait at arm's length.

"I appeal to you, doctor. Could those artless eyes, that candid brow, deceive? Yet—"

On a sudden, he dropped the portrait, overcome with horror.

"Take it away; hide it from my gaze. Never let me see yonder picture again," he cried. "It is not the likeness of my unspotted darling, my sweet Paulina, but of that beautiful fiend in woman's shape I spoke of a week ago, the girl-poisoner, I blazoned to the world as innocent twenty five years ago—"

"And who was the mother of your wife," the doctor made solemn reply. "The awful truth can no longer be concealed from you, Sir Hector. The foreign music mistress under whose care you first met Lady Vanderoy at Monte Carlo, from whose house in Paris you married her, is just dead. She has sent you papers proving that her supposed daughter Paulina was in reality the child of the wretched woman—set at large, it is true, owing to your exertions—for all that branded as a parricide in the eyes of the world!"

The blow did not kill Sir Hector, but it paralysed his feelings. Stern as he had ever been, he became

from that time Draconian in his judgments. And least of all upon himself would he show the slightest tinge of compassion. The crime by which his own life had been jeopardised, a crime committed by the two favourites on whom he had lavished passionate affection and unbounded confidence, became the subject of his most rigid investigation. Had the law allowed it, he would even have acted the part of judge towards his own wife, and his *protégé,* her accomplice.

The two dropped from mortal ken into the living tomb of a prison, but the stern judge lived on, secretly triumphing over the self-mastery that now made existence possible.

THE END.

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